TOM SWIFT AND HIS HOUSE ON WHEELS

VICTOR APPLETON

Anthony
Frost
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8/24/36

" A RACE ! WE'LL SEE WHAT YOU CAN DO AGAINST THE HOUSE ON WHEELS ! "

Tom Swift and his House on Wheels. *Frontispiece* (*Page* 5[illegible]

TOM SWIFT AND HIS HOUSE ON WHEELS

OR

A Trip to the Mountain of Mystery

By

VICTOR APPLETON

Author of
"Tom Swift and His Motorcycle,"
"Tom Swift Among the Diamond Makers,"
"Tom Swift and His Talking Pictures,"
"The Don Sturdy Series,"
Etc.

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Tom Swift and His House on Wheels

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TOM SWIFT AND HIS HOUSE ON WHEELS

CHAPTER I

STRONG WORDS

Tom Swift, with a negative shake of his head, shoved several papers across the table that separated him from a burly, red-faced man whose eyes narrowly observed the young inventor.

"Then you refuse this contract, Mr. Swift —a contract for constructing over one hundred thousand dollars' worth of machinery on which you can make a handsome profit? You absolutely refuse it?"

The red-faced man in his eagerness was leaning forward now.

"Yes, Mr. Cunningham, I refuse!" was Tom's crisp answer. "The Swift Construction Company does not care to handle it."

Mr. Barton Swift, father of the young man

who thus calmly turned down what seemed like a good business proposition, nodded in affirmation of what his son had said.

"Is that your last word?" asked Basil Cunningham, who plainly showed his English ancestry, not only in his face and figure but in his general bearing and manner. "This refusal is final?" he inquired.

"Quite final and complete," answered Tom, as he added another document to the pile of those he had pushed toward his visitor. They were blue prints, specifications, and contract forms, but they all went across the table. "The matter is closed."

"But, look here! I say, now!" and Mr. Cunningham began to wax excited, not to say wroth. "I can't understand——"

"Do you mean to say you don't understand English?" asked Mr. Swift, and the smile on the face of the aged inventor took away whatever sting there might otherwise have been in the words. "I thought my son spoke very plainly. He said 'no,' and that's what he means."

"But look here, Mr. Swift! Do you agree with him?"

"Absolutely!"

"And you won't consider the contracts further?"

"The matter is closed, I told you!" and Tom Swift's voice was a bit sharp now.

With an imperious gesture the burly Englishman gathered up his papers and began to stuff them into a leather brief case bulging with other documents. If possible the red of his face deepened.

"Well," he began, "of all the——"

Tom Swift looked up sharply. He was on the verge of saying something that, he himself admitted, he might later have been sorry for when the door of the private office opened and a veritable giant of a man fairly squeezed his way through the doorway.

"What is it, Koku?" asked Tom, not quite pleased with such an interruption at this time.

"Excuse, Master," murmured the foreign giant, whose struggle with a strange tongue sometimes got the best of him. "But new engine him have come an' Mr. Jackson say him got to be lift up—so I lift if you want."

As if to demonstrate his strength, the giant put one finger under the edge of the heavy table around which the three men sat and, with as much ease as if he were lifting a feather, tilted it.

"My word, man! Don't do that!" cried Mr. Cunningham, for one of his feet was close to the leg of the table and he evidently feared

the weight would come down on his toes when Koku let go.

"Don't worry," said Tom, with a smile. "Koku won't drop it."

Fascinated by this remarkable exhibition of strength, by which the giant raised several hundred pounds on one finger, the Englishman started to move from his proximity to Koku. But there was no need of alarm, though the timely entrance of Tom Swift's gigantic henchman had evidently stopped a tirade that was on the lips of the visitor.

"That will do, Koku," said Tom, in a low voice. "I will see Mr. Jackson shortly and look at the new engine."

"Yes, Master," murmured the giant, whose whisper, however, was a hoarse bellow in contrast with others.

Koku took himself out and Cunningham, staring at the closed door as though he could not believe what he had seen, continued to stuff his rejected contracts into his case.

"I'm sorry about this," said the Englishman in more subdued tones than he had used before the advent of Koku. "I'm not only sorry, but I'm disappointed and I think I haven't been fairly treated." His anger was rising again, that was evident.

"How do you mean—not fairly treated?" asked Tom sharply.

"Why, dash it all, when I first broached this matter to you I was as much as given to understand that your firm would go ahead and make the apparatus for me."

"You were given to understand nothing of the sort," replied Tom quietly.

"I say I was!" and the Englishman banged his fist hard on the heavy table that Koku had raised with one finger. "I tell you I have been shamefully treated here, and I'm not going to stand it. I——"

Again the door suddenly opened and Basil Cunningham made a move as if to hide beneath the table he had so lately pounded. But instead of Koku, this time the intruder was an aged and decrepit colored man whose whitening, curly hair made a pathetic frame for his black, wizened face. No gentler creature, as a man, could well have been visioned, and Mr. Cunningham, who had evidently been expecting a return of the giant, looked a bit foolish.

"Did yo' all call me, Massa Swift?" asked the negro gently.

"No, Rad, we didn't call," said Tom, with a kind smile at the aged servant who often claimed, regarding the young inventor: "I done

nussed him from a baby, dat's whut I done!"

"'Scuse me, Massa Tom," went on Eradicate. "But I thought I done heard a noise in here, an'——"

"We were just talking, Rad, that was all. We have about finished," and Tom looked significantly at the red-faced Briton. "I'll call you if I need you, Rad."

"Yes, sah," and Eradicate shuffled out.

"There is no use in further wasting your time or my own, Mr. Cunningham," proceeded Tom Swift, when the three again faced each other. "My mind is fully made up, and you see that my father agrees."

"I agree fully with my son," added aged Mr. Swift.

"Then I'll have to get somebody else to carry out this contract!" snapped Mr. Cunningham. "I'll go to some firm that knows how to take a big profit when it's offered."

"That's your privilege," replied Tom, smiling. "We don't want it."

There was something so final in his words that Mr. Cunningham knew better than to try other arguments. The last paper was thrust into the case, and the way in which the Englishman snapped the lock showed his anger. He caught up his hat, muttered a "good-day," and hurried out.

"Well, that's that," said Tom Swift, with something between a sigh of relief and regret.

"Tom, you did just right!" exclaimed his father. "I didn't want to interfere, but you gave him the right answer. We want nothing to do with his sort, even though we may have to close down the plant on account of lack of orders."

"We are running a bit short," Tom admitted. "And with all I spent on the talking pictures, with no prospect of any substantial revenue from them for some time, we may be financially up against it soon, Dad."

"Don't worry, Tom. We'll pull through, somehow. You can keep busy, can't you?"

"Oh, yes, I've got to finish my House on Wheels," and Tom fairly spoke of it in capital letters, so near to his heart was this newest invention.

"Ah, yes, Tom, your House on Wheels," and Mr. Swift chuckled a little. "I've been looking it over now and again. Seems as if you had a pretty good thing there."

"I hope it will work out," responded the young man.

"Looks as if you were fitting it up for a trip around the world," went on his father smiling. "Are you?"

"Not exactly, Dad."

"I might make another guess, Tom, my boy," and still the aged man was laughing.

"Well, there's no law that I know of, Dad, to stop you from making guesses," and Tom busied himself over several papers that seemed to need close attention.

"Well, then, Tom, I'll guess that you're going to use your new House on Wheels for a wedding journey. How about that?"

"Who says anything about a wedding trip?" cried Tom, his face almost as red as the Englishman's had been.

"Oh, no one has *said* anything, Tom," his father answered mildly. "But from the manner in which you and Mary Nestor have been going about of late, looking into furniture store windows and——"

"Oh, there's too much talk going on in this town!" exclaimed Tom, and his father laughed heartily at his son's evident discomfiture.

"Well, wedding trip or world tour, your new House on Wheels appears to be a clever bit of work," went on Mr. Swift. "When will it be finished?"

"Can't say, exactly. Though now that the new engine has arrived, as Koku informed me, I can rush things. I've been waiting for the machinery. That's why I'm glad, in a way, I

didn't have to take on the Cunningham contracts."

"Valuable as they were," remarked Mr. Swift.

"Valuable as they were," agreed his son. "And now, if you'll excuse me, Dad, I'll go take a look at that new engine."

"I have some matters to attend to myself," said old Mr. Swift, who, though he had given up active participation in the plant some time before, still maintained a general supervision over certain matters. He left the private office just as Ned Newton, the young financial manager, entered in some haste. Nodding to Tom's father, Ned turned to the young inventor and asked:

"What's this I hear about you turning down Cunningham's work?"

"I don't know, Ned, what you heard, nor how, so I can't reply."

"I was just coming in through the yard when I saw Cunningham getting into an auto with a man who had a face like a rat's. He was a stranger to me; but I knew Cunningham, of course. Say, he was mad, that Englishman! I heard him muttering something about your having refused his contracts and, as nearly as I could make out, he was cussing you up hill

and down dale and threatening not only to take his contracts to another firm but to get even with you as well."

"Yes he was angry when he left here," admitted Tom. "But that's all bosh about his going to get even. It was a plain business proposition. Cunningham is a good business man, whatever else he may be, and business men don't look for revenge just because one firm won't do their manufacturing for them."

"Maybe not. It might have been a lot of superheated atmosphere. But I can't understand, Tom, why you didn't take his work. There would have been a good profit in it, you told me, after the preliminary investigation."

"Yes, the profit was there."

"Well, then, what was wrong with such a handsome contract for the very kind of machinery that we are so well equipped to manufacture?"

"If you really want to know, Ned, I'll tell you."

"Of course I want to know."

"Well, then, it's my opinion that Basil Cunningham is a plain, unvarnished, first-water crook!"

CHAPTER II

THE NEW INVENTION

NED NEWTON stood for several seconds intently gazing at his chum and business associate after Tom Swift's emphatic rejoinder. Then, feeling that as financial manager of the Swift plant he ought not too easily give up a chance for making money, Ned remarked:

"Well, Tom, I suppose you know your own business best, but you ought to have something to back up your opinion that Cunningham isn't straight."

"I've got enough to convince myself, Ned, though maybe not enough to make you see things the way I do. In fact, I haven't any documentary evidence, but I still maintain that Cunningham is a crook."

"In that case, of course we don't want anything to do with him," agreed Ned. "But what sort of evidence have you, Tom?"

"I may be mistaken," replied Tom, who was willing to give any man the benefit of a doubt;

"but I have a very strong suspicion that the delicate machinery Cunningham wanted us to manufacture for him would infringe on the patents of certain English machines used for scientific and optical work."

"Infringement!" exclaimed Ned.

"That's what it would be if we undertook it, and if it were found out we would be liable to prosecution," stated Tom. "Even if we weren't found out, of course I wouldn't undertake such work."

"Of course," agreed Ned heartily. "But are you sure? You have been making some strong assertions against Cunningham."

"I don't believe I'll be called on to prove them in court, for this is just between us," said Tom. "But I looked over the preliminary sketches of the machinery this Englishman wanted us to make for him. At first I was inclined to go on with it. But the other day I saw a notice in an English publication concerning some new scientific machinery just completed and it was almost identical with the blue prints and specifications Cunningham showed me. If we turned out the machinery for him he'd set up a shop over here for making those instruments and it would get us in Dutch once it came out."

"That's right, Tom. I guess you acted wisely in turning him down. He's mad, mad as a wet hen, but let him splutter. That's what he was doing to the Queen's taste when he got in the auto with that rat-faced individual."

"Yes, let him splutter," agreed Tom. "He can't harm us."

However, later on, he was to revise that opinion of the Englishman.

"Of course it's too bad to lose all that good money," mused Ned. "On a hundred-thousand-dollar contract we could probably knock down twenty per cent. at least."

"Yes," agreed Tom, "it would have been picking up a nice bunch of cash. But I'm not going to make patent imitations under cover for anybody. I want nothing to do with fraudulent stuff. We can get enough good contracts, I think."

"Well," remarked Ned, with a shrug of his shoulders, "good contracts aren't going around these days begging some one to take them into their shop. But I dare say we shall pull through."

"Maybe I can get a lot of orders for my House on Wheels when I get it completed," chuckled Tom.

"Nothing doing!" declared Ned, with a

laugh. "You'll make only one House on Wheels and I can see you and Mary rolling off in that to the music of——"

"Hey! Where do you get that stuff?" exploded Tom, making an ineffectual reach to punch his chum. "That's the second crack today. Dad made one and now you. Where do you get it?"

"Well, since you turned down the Cunningham contract," went on Ned somewhat hastily, producing some papers from his pocket, "suppose we go into this Blakely matter. It isn't such a big thing, but we want to keep the wheels turning."

"Sure," agreed Tom, and the two were soon deep in calculations.

To the old readers of these books Tom Swift needs no introduction. But those to whom this volume comes as their first venture, it may be necessary to say that Tom Swift was a brilliant young inventor who lived with his father in the town of Shopton on Lake Carlopa.

The initial volume, entitled "Tom Swift and His Motorcycle," related how Tom became possessed of a machine that was damaged when Mr. Wakefield Damon, its rider, tried to climb a tree.

That was the beginning of Tom's mechanical activities, for he bought the motorcycle cheap,

repaired it, and had some wonderful adventures on it. The tree-climbing incident also served to start the friendship of Tom and Mr. Damon, a friendship that had lasted, though the eccentric man, who blessed everything from his fountain pen to his boots, was much older than Tom Swift.

After his experience with the motorcycle, the young inventor had many startling and dangerous experiences in aircraft, submarines, and in turning out, with the help of his father and with Ned Newton as financial adviser, many strange machines.

Tom's latest invention is told of in the volume just before this one you are now reading, entitled "Tom Swift and His Talking Pictures." He made a machine which brought the images and voices of public performers directly into the home. The making of this machine had taken considerable cash, and though Tom had sold certain rights to a syndicate, the money would not be coming in for some time.

"And that's one reason I was so anxious for this Cunningham contract to go through," remarked Ned, who was talking business matters over with Tom following the departure of the Englishman.

"We'll get other work to do," declared Tom.

"To tell you the truth, I'm not over anxious to clutter the shop up with any other stuff until I get my House on Wheels well out of the way."

"Say, just what is this new invention, anyhow?" asked Ned. "I've been so busy I haven't paid much attention to it."

"Well, the name tells just what it is," said Tom. "Briefly, it is a glorified auto—a veritable house that one can not only live in but travel in."

"You mean a house with rooms and a bath and—and—everything?" asked Ned.

"That's it—a bath and everything. Of course, the rooms aren't large, and the beds are to be folded back against the wall when they aren't in use."

"What about eats?" asked Ned.

"There's to be a kitchen with an electric stove," replied Tom.

"Run a stove from a storage battery?" exclaimed Ned. "Say, it can't be done! You'd have to have such a big battery that it would be a job to cart it around."

"Not a storage battery," explained Tom. "My House on Wheels is to be operated like some of the new, big jitneys, by a gas-electric motor. There's a gasolene engine of twelve cylinders, and, by the way, it's just arrived from

Detroit, so Koku told me. Well, that motor operates a dynamo which furnishes the current that drives the auto, operates the stove and other appliances."

"Then you don't take power directly from the gasolene engine?" asked Ned.

"Only in case of emergency; that is, if the electric motor goes on the fritz. By using my gasolene motor to generate the current to run the car I get a much smoother flow of power, and there are other advantages."

"Does the dingus look anything like a house?" asked Ned.

"I object to your calling it a 'dingus,'" laughed the young inventor. "But in outward appearance it is like a small house."

"With doors and windows?"

"Yes, and even window shutters. Aside from an entrance back of the driver's seat, there is only one door, however, and that it at the rear."

"How about a pair of steps?" asked Ned, thinking to stump his chum.

"I've provided for those, too. There are steps at the rear for easy access to the interior, as my catalogs will say. Only, to keep small boys from hitch-hiking on them, the steps fold up out of the way when the House on Wheels is moving."

"Then you're really going to tour in it?" asked Ned.

"Sure!"

"Going to be pretty heavy, isn't it?"

"Oh, around two tons, I guess."

"It's no flivver, at any rate. But won't it move like a canal boat?"

"Canal boat! Do you want to insult me?" cried Tom. "On good roads she'll do fifty or sixty miles an hour."

"Whew!" whistled Ned. "Guess I'd better go and take a look at this thing."

"Come on," invited Tom.

He was preparing to lead the way out of his private office to that part of the shop where he was constructing the new invention, when Mr. Jackson, the manager, entered with an air that caused Tom suddenly to ask:

"What's the matter?"

CHAPTER III

NED'S SUSPICIONS

"HAVE you given any orders about unpacking the new engine that just arrived from Detroit?" asked Mr. Jackson of Tom Swift.

"You mean the twelve cylinder engine for my House on Wheels?" the young inventor inquired.

"That's the one."

"Why, no. Koku informed me only a little while ago that it had come. But I couldn't come out to look at it because that Cunningham chap was in the office. Why, is it being unpacked? And by whom?"

"It is, and by a couple of strange young men who say you just put them on the pay roll yesterday to help with your new invention. They went at the work as though they knew what they were about, but I thought I'd speak to you."

"I'm glad you did!" exclaimed Tom. "I've hired no new hands, young or old, for a long

time. I wouldn't without consulting you."

"That's what I thought. But these fellows seemed to know what they were about, and I didn't like to tell them to lay off."

"There's something crooked here!" exclaimed Tom. "This must be looked into. Come on!" he called to Ned Newton.

As the three walked along a corridor that led to one of the main shops where Tom's latest achievement in a mechanical way was in process of construction, the young inventor closely questioned Mr. Jackson.

"Had they got the motor out of the packing case when you left them?" Tom was anxious to know.

"Not yet. It's a pretty big piece of machinery and won't be unpacked in a hurry."

"Then we may be in time!" Tom ejaculated.

"Time for what?" asked Ned.

"To stop any funny work."

"Whew!" whistled the financial manager. "As bad as that? Whom do you suspect?"

"You never can tell," was Tom's reply. "Ever since I've been in this business I've had to fight crooks and sharps. And I didn't like the way Cunningham acted after I turned down his proposition."

"He sure was mad," declared Ned. "But

do you think he knew anything about your House on Wheels, and might try to put sand in the motor bearings or hire some one to do it?"

"You never can tell," said Tom again. "Though if it was Cunningham, it was pretty quick work."

"Crooks very often need to act quickly," observed Ned.

Tom hurried forward and was the first of the three to enter the shop. In one corner was a heavy case and opening it were two men, the only occupants of the place just then. At the sound of Tom's entrance they turned, straightened up and looked apprehensive. And well they might, for Ned cried:

"The rat-faced man, Tom! Look! The one who was with Cunningham!"

He pointed to one of the two whose countenance, especially in his appearance of fright, did resemble that of a rat. An instant later he and his companion dropped the tools they had been using and leaped from a near-by open window.

"Stop them!" yelled Tom. But the rascals were too quick, and when the young inventor and his friends reached the casement the two were running across the yard toward the main gate which was, just then, open to let in a truck.

"Stop those men!" yelled Tom, seeing several of his workman, as well as Eradicate and Koku, loitering in the yard.

Not stopping to ask questions, several hands gave chase. The old colored man joined in with a yell of:

"I'll get 'em fo' yo', Massa Tom!"

But his will was better than his deed, for his aged limbs refused to take him over the ground fast enough. As for Koku, the giant would only need to get within hand grasp of the rascals to put a stop to their flight. But, like most big men, Koku was slow in getting started, and the two plotters were beyond the gate before any of their pursuers were within catching distance.

Tom and Ned leaped out of the window also, but reached the gate only in time to see the two plotters disappearing down the road in an auto that, evidently, was in waiting.

"Come, on, Tom! Chase 'em!" cried Ned. "Get out your electric runabout and we'll overtake 'em!"

"Not a chance," Tom replied. "My runabout is having its batteries charged and all the other fast cars are away on the other side of the works. No, they've got us beat. I only hope they haven't damaged my new motor."

"I think they didn't have a chance to do that," said Ned encouragingly. "But who were they, Tom?"

Neither the young inventor nor any one else around the shop, including Mr. Jackson, knew. The two men, one of whom looked like a rat, had appeared at the main gate early that morning, it was learned on checking up. They presented an order signed, apparently, by Tom Swift, authorizing them to come in. It was a rule that any but the regular workmen must have such an order to gain entrance to the plant. But this order was forged.

So the two got in and falsely stating that they had come from the Detroit plant of the concern which had made Tom's new motor, they gained access to the shop where it had been left by a truck from the freight office.

Had it not been that Mr. Jackson saw the men at work and wondered enough about them to tell Tom, they might have carried out their plans, whatever they were. That the plans were based on an intent to work Tom Swift or his possessions some injury, could not be doubted.

A hasty survey, however, showed that the motor had not been taken from its case, so it was not damaged.

"What was the game, Tom?" asked Ned, when orders had been given to admit no more strangers to the plant on any pretext.

"Well, I'll say Cunningham, as a guess."

"You mean he put these men up to wrecking your motor after you turned him down?"

"That's the way it looks to me, Ned. Of course it may have been some of my other enemies. But since you recognized the rat-faced chap, why, it looks suspicious to me."

"But what would be Cunningham's object? He didn't want you to make him a House on Wheels, did he? Or sell him any stock in the enterprise of manufacturing them?"

"No, he didn't mention the matter. I didn't even know that he knew I had such a thing in mind, much less almost completed."

"Well, he found out in some way."

"Very likely. And when I refused to help him make machinery to turn out infringements on English patented apparatus, he turned nasty and decided to make me sorry."

"So it looks, Tom. Lucky you caught the plot in time."

"That's due to Mr. Jackson's foresight. It was a narrow escape. Half an hour later and that motor would be fit only for the scrap-heap. Look here!"

Tom held up a small bottle of a very powerful acid—one capable of eating into and corroding the hardest steel.

"I picked that up where one of the scoundrels dropped it," Tom said. "They evidently wanted to get at some of the valves on the cylinders. A few drops of this acid in each one and the walls would have been so scored that even reboring would not have made them fit to use again."

"A dirty trick!" exclaimed Ned. "I wish we could have caught them."

"So do I, for the sake of what may happen in the future."

Leaving Koku and Eradicate on guard over the new motor, Tom took Ned to where the chassis and body of the House on Wheels were being constructed. It was the first time Ned had seen the new invention and at a glimpse of it, standing in the middle of the shop where it was receiving its final coat of paint, the young manager exclaimed:

"Say, that's a peach!"

"Glad you like it," commented Tom.

The house stood up on a framework corresponding to the chassis on which it would later be mounted. Tom opened the back door and a pair of steps, hitherto concealed in a recess,

unfolded, let down, and could be used for entering the little dwelling.

There were four rooms within, two containing folding cots that made comfortable beds. One room of those remaining was used as a kitchen. The other was a living room, though if needful the two bedchambers could also be utilized for this purpose, when the cots were folded away.

"And that's the electric stove, is it?" asked Ned, pointing to the apparatus.

"That's it. And here's the pantry, the ice box, and so on," added Tom, indicating the various conveniences.

"Pretty slick!" was the enthusiastic comment of Ned Newton.

"But where do you work the thing from?"

"The motor goes out there," and, going to the front of the house, Tom showed where the big machine was to be mounted under a regulation auto hood. "This little compartment will contain the driver's seat and the controls," he went on, showing a space divided by a partition from the sleeping quarters.

The kitchen was in the rear of the House on Wheels, and in front of that was the combined sitting and dining room, the sleeping quarters being forward.

"Putting the kitchen in the rear insures the

odors being carried away as the machine moves along," explained Tom.

"Then you're going to cook as you travel?" asked Ned.

"Sure!" assented Tom.

"That is you are—or some one else," chuckled Ned.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that my suspicions are confirmed," went on Ned, with a laugh, and taking care to get beyond Tom's reach before making his next remark. He added: "I know where the first stop will be for this traveling House on Wheels!"

"Where?" asked Tom, unsuspiciously.

"Honeymoon Lane!" yelled Ned, making a leap to escape his chum.

CHAPTER IV

SURPRISING NEWS

After all, Tom Swift had sense enough to take good-naturedly the chaffing to which Ned Newton subjected him.

The young inventor could not but admit that his latest invention, coupled with the fact that he and Mary Nestor had been more than ordinarily chummy recently, would lead to the suspicion that there might soon be a closer relationship between them than heretofore.

Mary and Tom had know each other a long time. Once her family and Tom were marooned on Earthquake Island, and Tom had managed, under great difficulties, to rig up machinery and send a wireless message. Mr. Nestor had held a great opinion of the young man's ability and skill ever since.

"I'll Honeymoon Lane you if I get hold of you!" threatened Tom as he and Ned left the shop where the House on Wheels was nearing completion.

Various matters occupied the attention of the two young men for the remainder of the day. Ned, charged with keeping track of the finances of the company, was busy with negotiations looking to the securing of manufacturing contracts that would keep the plant running. He was a little disappointed that the Cunningham proposition had been turned down, but he could but agree with Tom that to take a contract about which there was any suspicion of wrongdoing would be poor policy.

As for Tom Swift, once he saw that the chassis and upper structure of his new House on Wheels was nearing completion, he arranged with Mr. Jackson to get the new motor on the block for a test. This took until nearly night, and then Tom had things in shape for a preliminary tryout of the machinery the next day.

"No need to ask where you're going, Tom," chuckled Ned when, after the evening meal, which, as on many former occasions, he shared with the Swift family, he observed the young inventor getting out the electric runabout, the batteries of which were now fully charged.

"It's none of your business where I'm going!" said Tom with a smile which took any possible sting from the words.

"Well, I'm on the same sort of errand,"

commented the financial manager. "Mind if I take the roadster and give Helen a little spin?"

"Consider yourself a top and spin away!" chuckled Tom, and a little later he was on his way to see Mary Nestor while Ned piloted the small but speedy car in the direction of his sweetheart's home.

"Well, Tom, what's the latest news?" asked Mary when she had greeted him and they were seated on the porch.

"Oh, nothing much." Tom decided not to tell her about the Cunningham matter or the discovery of the two men tampering with the motor. "The new House on Wheels is coming on pretty well, though."

"That's good. Am I to get a ride in it?"

"Of course!"

"Tell me about it," she suggested, and Tom launched into an enthusiastic description of the interior of the new van-like vehicle, telling of the rooms, the electric stove, the little pantry and ice box until Mary exclaimed in delight:

"I can hardly wait until it's finished!"

"Which won't be long," commented the young inventor. "If the motor tests out all right, and I think it will, all that remains to be done is to put it in place and see how the whole affair works—I mean whether I have designed

it properly so that it will keep to the road at high speeds."

Then they talked of other matters until some uneasy movements on the part of Mrs. Nestor, in the house, warned the young man that the hour was getting late and that he had better leave.

"I'll see you to-morrow, Mary," said Tom, as he started down the drive to where he had left the runabout.

"Yes—I guess so," said Mary, and it was not until afterward that Tom noted and remembered the curious hesitancy in her voice. But now he was thinking of other matters.

It was when he was half way along the road that lay between Mary's house and his own home that, passing along a lonely stretch of highway at moderate speed, Tom saw, thrown across the road in front of him, in bold relief by the brilliant rays of the moon, a gesticulating shadow of a man.

The shadow was waving its arms as though in signal to the oncoming motorist to stop, and when Tom sensed this he began to be uneasy and was about to press the lever that would give him full speed ahead.

"I'm not going to be fooled by any trick!" he murmured. "There have been too many hold-ups of late along this road. And if it

isn't a hold-up it may be another attempt by Cunningham to annoy me. Look out there!" he yelled as the signaling figure and its accompanying shadow took the middle of the road. "Out of my way or I'll run you down!"

"Bless my accident policy, don't do that!" cried a voice.

For Tom the reaction was so great that his hand slipped from the electric speed lever, unconsciously pulling it toward the stop notch, and the runabout began to slow down.

"Mr. Damon!" cried Tom. "Is that you?"

"That's my name," said the voice of the man and he and his shadow both stepped to one side as the electric car rolled up and came to a stop, with the application of brakes, opposite him. "Thanks for picking me up. I don't know you, and I'm surprised that you could recognize me in the darkness, but——"

"Oh, you know me, too!" chuckled Tom, and then the man cried:

"Bless my opera glasses! It's Tom Swift!"

"Of course!" agreed the owner of that name.

"Well, how in the world did you hear of my accident and come to get me?" asked Mr. Wakefield Damon, for he it was. "Bless my carburetor, but this is remarkable!"

"I didn't hear of any accident," said Tom, "and I'm sorry to learn that you have been in

one. I just happened to come past this way. At first, I thought you were a highwayman. But when I heard you bless your accident policy I knew you."

"It's lucky I spoke promptly!" chuckled the eccentric man.

"What happened?" asked Tom, as he made room for his friend on the seat beside him. "Are you hurt?"

"Oh, no. But my auto stalled about two miles back and I couldn't get it going. There wasn't any garage near, and I hated to go to some strange house, rouse them and ask to use the telephone to have a towing car come out to get me. So I started to walk, thinking I might meet some kind-hearted motorist. I never dreamed you would come by."

"It was just chance," said Tom. "But what's the matter with your car, and where is it? Maybe I can fix it for you."

"No, it isn't worth while. I think the points need filing and that isn't easy to do in the dark. If you'll run me to your house I'll stay all night, provided you have room. My wife is away so she won't miss me. It will be time enough in the morning to send a garage man out to get the car."

"All right," assented Tom. Truth to tell, he was tired and did not relish working over a

refractory auto at this hour of the night, or rather, morning, for it was now past twelve. "We'll be glad to put you up, Mr. Damon."

"And I'm glad it happened, Tom, for it will give me a chance to see this new House on Wheels of yours. The last time I was over you were just planning it," said Mr. Damon. "I expect, by now, it is making regular trips."

"Not quite so fast as that. But we're about ready for a tryout."

"Then I'm just in time, bless my tooth brush!" chuckled Mr. Damon.

Next morning, Mr. Damon, after a view of the House on Wheels, to which he gave enthusiastic praise, arranged with a garage worker to come and get him and take him to where his stalled car had been left. Tom busied himself over the motor block test and, to his delight, found that the new engine was even better than rated.

"Of course it needs to be broken in," he told Ned. "But that is only a matter of time. I'm going to rush things through now."

Orders were given for an extra shift of workmen to assemble the House on Wheels and put the motor in place. Aside from some refinements and equipment, the big, new car was almost ready for the road. To such good end did the men work that day, urged on and

aided by Tom, that by night the motor was in place, connected to the drive shaft and the machine looked almost finished.

"You could almost run it out as it is now," said Ned.

"Not for a couple of days," replied Tom, with a shake of his head. "But at least it looks the part, so I think I'll telephone Mary and see if she can't come over and take a look."

He hurried to the telephone in his workroom and was soon in connection with the Nestor home, as Ned could tell by the talk. Mary was on the wire, and the financial manager heard Tom say:

"What's that, Mary? You're going away? Why—why——"

Then came a pause. Ned knew Mary was speaking, and what she said seemed to be surprising news for Tom Swift, judging by the look on his face.

CHAPTER V

WORK AND WORRY

Some matters of business routine called Ned Newton from the room while Tom was still telephoning, and when the financial manager returned he heard his chum say:

"Well, of course if it's all arranged there isn't anything more to be said, I suppose." A pause. Then: "Of course I'll come over to see you off. But—it's pretty sudden. What's that? Oh, yes, of course." Then the good-bye.

Tom hung up the receiver with leaden fingers, and there was a listlessness in his walk as he went back to where he had been working. Ned tried to assume an air as if he had heard nothing, but it was impossible to ignore the fact that Tom had received some unpleasant news. If he wanted to speak of it—all right. If he didn't——

But Tom blurted it out.

"Mary's going away!"

"Away?"

"Oh, not for good," and Tom laughed nervously at Ned's startled implication. "It's just on a visit to some relatives she had been promising to go and see for a long time. Matters are now arranged and she is going."

"Rather—er—sudden, isn't it?" asked Ned. For Tom had spoken of his call on Mary the night before and had then made no mention of an impending visit.

"Yes, very sudden. She didn't tell me until just now, when I asked her to come over and take a look at the House on Wheels. But she says she will be too busy packing. Very sudden!" and Tom's voice had a new quality in it.

"Any special reason for her rush?" asked Ned, who felt privileged now that his chum had given him the opening.

"Well, yes, in a way. The relatives to whom Mary is going on a visit are giving a house party for one member of the family who is soon to sail for Europe. Unless Mary starts to-morrow she won't see this forty-second cousin, or whatever she is, and it seems there are family reasons why she should."

"Then she's going soon?"

"Takes the train to-morrow morning."

"Going to be gone long?"

"She isn't sure how long. Hang it all! This upsets all my plans!" and Tom moodily paced the floor.

"Oh, well, it isn't forever! Cheer up!" consoled Ned. "She'll be coming back. My girl went away once."

"Yes, I know. But these people—they——"

Tom paused, significantly, it seemed.

"Well, what's wrong with them?" Ned wanted to know.

"Oh, nothing much, except they're fairly bursting with money."

"Well, that's a good thing, isn't it?"

"Not considering what money means and does nowadays. Mary's going out of her depth, so to speak and——"

"Say, look here!" exclaimed Ned. "You needn't worry about your girl. She's got a level head."

"Yes, I know. But when she gets among millionaires she's likely to lose that level."

"I don't believe so. Why, you're no poverty-stricken chap yourself, Tom, though I admit our bank account isn't as big as it will be when the dividends from the talking pictures will come in."

"I'm not one, two, six in money matters compared to the Winthrop family," complained

Tom moodily. "They're filthy rich, and it isn't going to do Mary any good mixing up with that bunch."

"You mean she'll come back dissatisfied with the simple life of Shopton and vicinity?"

"That's what I fear."

"Oh, cheer up, disciple of gloom!" laughed Ned. "You'll find Mary just the same when she comes back as she is now. Is she eager to go?"

"That's just it!" complained Tom. "She seems very keen about it."

"Oh, well, a girl likes a change. And it can't last forever."

"No, I suppose not. Oh, well, I'm a grouch not to wish Mary to have a good time. But I did want her to see this House on Wheels," and Tom acted like a small boy who has been kept home from a party.

"She'll see it soon enough," predicted Ned. "And it will look all the better when it's complete and has had a tryout."

"Maybe," was all Tom would say, and then he plunged into work.

Ned expected that his friend would again go over to the Nestor house in the evening, but Tom, with rather a set look on his face, announced that he intended to work until late on

his newest invention. However, he did telephone to Mary and arranged to call for her the next morning to take her to the station.

What took place at the train when Mary departed Ned did not know. But Tom came back looking more gloomy than before and plunged into work with a zeal which left his devoted chum far behind.

The Swift plant was a busy place in the days that followed. There was always more or less of routine labor in connection with several machines which Tom and his father had perfected, patented, and had put on the market for general sale.

The latest invention of the young man, excepting the House on Wheels, had been a machine for showing moving pictures in the home, in simultaneous connection with vocal and instrumental effects by radio. It was possible to sit in one's parlor and not only see a distant theatrical performance, but actually hear all that went on. The vision of the actors and actresses was reduced in size, but the pictures were very clear. And the radio, of an improved type, clearly brought every word and every note of music through the air.

This invention, or a share in it, had been sold to a syndicate which, for a time, had fought

Tom Swift fiercely. But now matters were straightened out, though there was much detail to finish.

With that, and with overseeing the completion of his House on Wheels, Tom Swift had plenty of work to keep him busy. He was also worrying, as Ned easily guessed.

Though Tom received and wrote letters, the worried air did not depart from him and Ned knew his chum had a sore feeling in his heart. He was disappointed that Mary had not seen the new car before going away.

But if the young inventor was not privileged to listen to Mary's praise, he had the chance to hear the enthusiastic comments of Mr. Damon who came over a few days after his night breakdown.

"Bless my safe deposit box, Tom!" exclaimed the eccentric man, "but I regard your House on Wheels as one of the most marvelous inventions of all time!"

"Strictly speaking it isn't an invention," said Tom. "It is merely an adaptation of several existing ones. I've simply taken a small house and put it on an automobile body."

"But you have done it very cleverly," said Mr. Damon. "This is an age of travel, Tom, and everybody is doing it. Now the one great

drawback of travel is to find a place to stay at night, for no one likes to journey after dark, unless in a sleeping car.

"So it has come about that there are hotels and you know what a bother it is to arrange for a night's stay. But now you come along with a house in which a person can travel all day, as in an ordinary automobile. Then at night, when getting to a town, instead of having to hunt up a garage and then a hotel, you just pull your bed down from the wall and tumble in. It's great!"

"Well, I thought of that," Tom said. "I'm hoping it will be the success I think it may be."

"Of course it will be!" declared Mr. Damon. "You can book my order for one now, Tom."

"Consider it booked!" and the young inventor smiled for one of the few times since Mary had gone away.

In spite of the fact that the House on Wheels was, to the unobservant, well nigh complete the day Mary Nestor went away, Tom said considerable yet remained to be done, and for another week he and his men labored hard over the structure.

But finally the last coat of varnish was applied and given time to dry. Not all the fittings were in place, but that was a small matter. The big twelve-cylinder motor was

connected and the brake test had been satisfactory.

Then one evening, as Ned was about to leave to go to his home, Tom remarked to him:

"Can you spare the time to make a trip with me, Ned?"

"A trip where and how?"

"I don't know just where, but as to how—in the House on Wheels."

"Is she all ready?"

"We'll give her a tryout to-morrow. Maybe the thing won't work as well as I planned, but we'll soon know. If it comes anywhere near the mark I've set, will you go with me?"

"On a trip? Sure!"

"All right," said Tom, pacing the floor of his office. "We'll have the tryout to-morrow. After that—well, we'll see!"

CHAPTER VI

THE TRYOUT

Tom Swift took his place in the driver's seat of the House on Wheels. This compartment was not unlike the front seat in any large, van-like truck, except that it was more comfortable and was equipped with a number of dials, indicators and controls.

"Well, Ned, coming?" asked the young inventor, looking down at his chum and smiling.

"I guess so, if you're quite sure she won't blow up."

"If she does, we'll go together!" joked Tom.

It was the day of the tryout, and while some work yet remained to be done on the new machine, it was in shape for a road test. It had been run around the big yard of the Swift plant and had acted in a satisfactory manner. What it would actually do under road conditions and off the level, was something yet to be demonstrated.

The big twelve-cylinder motor had met the

block test and had been able to propel the heavy car around the shops. Tom felt sure there was plenty of reserve power, or would be when it had been tuned up.

Ned now climbed to the seat beside his chum. There was room for three in this compartment, but though Mr. Damon had been invited to come over for the initial run, the eccentric man had not appeared.

With Ned on the seat beside him, Tom touched his foot to the button of the self-starter and with a roar the powerful motor sprang into life. Though it was big and had the strength of many horses, so well was it balanced that there was hardly any vibration, which spells the death knell of many machines otherwise perfect.

Letting the motor warm up a bit, Tom carefully tested the various gear and control levers. Then, gently letting in the clutch, the House on Wheels rolled slowly out of the shed where it had been constructed.

"There she goes!" cried Mr. Swift, who was almost as eager as his son over the success of the venture.

"Rolling like an egg!" exclaimed Mr. Jackson, who had had no small share in building the machine after Tom had planned it.

"By golly! She suah am a reg'lar ark!" was

Eradicate's comment. "Mistah Noah he'd suah be livin' pretty if he'd had one ark like dat when de flood come! Ha! Ha!"

There was a subdued cheer from the assembled workmen as Tom Swift proved that at least his machine would run smoothly, and with Koku loudly warning idlers away from the gate, the House on Wheels approached the open highway for the first time.

As might have been expected, any activity at the Swift plant was sure to attract attention from the residents of Shopton. Though they were accustomed to seeing many strange machines issue from the big gates, or perhaps fly over the high fence, the matter never lost its interest. So, on this morning, there was a crowd of sightseers.

Nor were they disappointed with the first view of Tom's new wonder. Bright in its gay colors and varnish, the House on Wheels was a sight for those who appreciate fine cars and machinery. Majestically it rolled out on the big rubber-tired wheels and, driving slowly until he was sure of the feel of the control wheel, Tom eased his machine through the gates and straightened it out on the broad road.

"Hurray!" yelled a boy in the crowd. "It's a regular circus wagon!"

"I wish I had one like it!" echoed a companion.

For a little way, so slowly did Tom nurse the motor along, the crowd could keep pace with the machine. Then, when he had the feel that everything was going smoothly, the young inventor pressed the accelerator down a little.

The result was at once apparent. As smoothly as a big locomotive, and with the same hint of power in reserve, the big House on Wheels went ahead so rapidly that the running crowd of boys and girls and men was soon left behind and Tom and Ned had the road to themselves save for an occasional motorist. But as this section was not ordinarily much traveled, they were not bothered by many other machines.

Drivers of cars who passed or approached the House on Wheels stared curiously at it, and more than one was heard to remark to a companion:

"Some advertising stunt, I guess."

"That might not be bad," commented Ned, after one or two repetitions of this.

"What?" asked Tom, who was intent on listening to the hum of the motor to detect a false note or failure of the oiling system.

"Using this for advertising," said Ned.

"Many a firm would pay big money to have a sign painted on the sides of this car, calling attention to the merits of Blank's chewing gum or Hank's breakfast food."

"There are no advertisements going on this!" decided Tom. "I'll make my money some other way."

"Even if you have to take on Cunningham's proposition?" teased Ned.

"I'll never have anything to do with that crook!" said the young man as he slowed down to turn a corner which would take them out on the big state highway. "I'll close down the plant before I'll help him infringe on other inventors. I've had that done to me too many times not to know what it means. No Cunningham in mine!"

They were now in comparatively open country, and though there was more traffic on the state road than on the thoroughfare they had left in coming from the Swift plant, there was not enough to worry a driver of Tom's experience.

"You need a hill for a real stiff test," remarked Ned.

"That's the idea, and we'll come to one soon if we keep on going."

"Well, there doesn't seem to be anything to

stop you," was his chum's opinion. "Hop right to it!"

They were bowling along at an increased speed when Tom suddenly leaned over and bent forward as if listening, which is exactly what he was doing.

"What's the matter?" asked his companion.

"Sounds like a knock."

They both listened intently, for though Ned did not have Tom's skill in inventiveness he was a good driver.

"There's something wrong," decided Tom, pulling over to the side of the road to be out of the way of passing traffic. "I'm thinking one of the oil feeds is clogged. Yes, she's heating up," he added, as he pointed to the motor temperature indicator which was one of many dials and gages on the instrument board.

The House on Wheels was brought to a halt and then Ned and Tom raised the hood for a look at the motor. There was an unusual wave of heat as soon as the sides were raised, and Tom's quick eye at once found the seat of trouble. A small valve that supplied oil to one of the many working parts was partly closed so that not enough of the lubricating fluid reached the shaft.

They resumed the journey, and Tom ven-

tured to open the throttle a little, though he had no intention of getting up to maximum speed, which should not be done with any new motor until after it has been limbered up for at least five hundred miles.

The House on Wheels responded well and stepped along rather fast.

"This is the life!" cried Ned gaily. "When do we eat, Tom?"

"Not on this trip. I didn't pack in any grub. And you can't turn in and go to bed, either. This is just a preliminary run so I can decide what changes are needed."

"It seems to me that everything is fine," said Ned. "She's running now like a sewing machine."

"Got to try her on a hill yet," was Tom's answer.

"I suppose so. If you go honeymooning in this you'll have hills to climb," observed Ned, and he noticed that Tom did not now resent a reference to a possible approaching marriage.

"We'll soon know what she can do on the up grade," said the young inventor, with a look ahead. "We're coming to a hill now and it grows stiffer the higher you climb. Yes, this will be a good test."

The first part of the hill was taken in fine fashion, somewhat to Tom's delighted surprise.

He had imagined the machine might labor, especially while new and stiff. But up went the House, never faltering.

Then, after a little comparatively level stretch, the hill took a sudden upward climb. For the first part of this the machine did well, there being no undue strain. But suddenly, when about half way up, there was a little jar, a sort of nervous shiver, and the motor stopped dead.

So quickly did it happen that Tom had no time to apply the brakes and Ned cried:

"We're backing downhill, Tom!"

"I know it!" responded the young inventor, a grim look on his tense face.

CHAPTER VII

THE RACE

The House on Wheels was half way up a steep slope when the motor stopped and the heavy, and somewhat clumsy car—clumsy because of its bulk—began to go backward. Of course there were brakes. Tom had provided a double set, and they would hold. He had tested them under severe strains. But it took a moment for both the young men to realize what had happened and to decide what to do.

Of course there was only one course of action after Tom had quickly discovered that the stoppage of the motor was not momentary, and that it could not be galvanized into action by the self-starter. The thing to do was to jam on the brakes, which the young inventor did before the backward motion of the House had gained it such momentum that it could not be checked.

"Whew!" whistled Ned, as he felt the ma-

chine come to what seemed like a reluctant stop. "That was a close call!"

"Oh, no," said Tom, half smiling. "I could have let her get up even more speed than she had, rolling backward, and yet have brought her to a stop with the one set of brakes."

"On this hill?" Ned was a bit incredulous.

"Yes, or on a steeper one. I want to try her on some mountain."

"Maybe you'll get the chance," Ned remarked.

"What do you mean?" asked Tom, for there seemed to be something his chum was holding back. But as, just then, a peculiar buzzing sounded from beneath the motor hood, Tom decided to investigate that before asking any questions.

The brakes were holding the House on Wheels midway up the rather steep hill, but on getting out of the driver's seat, which the two young men did very soon after the accident, their first care was to block the rear wheels with a log of wood which they dragged from a near-by thicket. After seeing that this would keep the car from rolling back downhill, even if the brakes should let go, Tom fastened a rope to the log and the other end of the cable to the rear of the House on Wheels.

"What's the idea?" asked Ned. "Going to use that as a drag going downhill on the other side?"

"No. But haven't you often noticed that where motorists have to stop on a hill, and use rocks or logs to block them, they go away after getting a new start and leave the obstructions in the road?"

"I've seen that many a time," agreed Ned, "and I've bawled 'em out for it more than once. The trouble is that they aren't there to hear what I think about 'em."

"That's just it. Well, I may want to start up without having to release my brakes suddenly, hence the log of wood. And as I don't want to leave you behind to roll the log out of the way, I fastened on this rope. We'll pull the log behind us up to the top of the hill, where it is level, and then we can stop and take it off."

"Good idea!" commented Ned. "Now let's see what's wrong. I do hope it isn't anything serious."

"No, it can't be," decided Tom. "The motor was too severely tested for that. It's just some little dingus that's out of order—maybe a broken oil pipe or a loose wire."

It was the latter that proved to be the seat of the trouble when a careful check-up had

been made. In the haste with which the House on Wheels had been assembled, this little item was overlooked. It required but a short time to put the ignition cable back in place, and then, having run the motor for some time, listening to the smooth purr of it, Tom announced that he was satisfied there would be no further trouble.

It was when they were ready to start on again that Tom's wisdom in blocking the wheels was demonstrated. For there was no need of a sudden letting in of the clutch, after racing the engine in gear to get momentum and speed enough to make a flying start uphill. The brakes were already released. The log prevented the House on Wheels from rolling backward, and the machine started slowly up the grade as if taking off from a level. The log was pulled along by means of the rope, and did not remain in the road a menace to following travelers.

"She's coming up in good style," commented Ned, as he observed the increasing speed of the machine even though the grade of the hill grew greater.

"Couldn't be better," agreed Tom, with a satisfied smile. "All the power I need and then some! When she gets broken in I expect great things of her."

"Looks so," murmured Ned.

In a short time they were at the top of the hill and a long, level road lay before them. They made a momentary stop to cast off the blocking log and then went on.

"I'm going back and take a look inside," said Ned after a while. "I want to see how she rides."

There was a passage leading from the driver's seat to the interior of the House, and Ned was soon making his way through the various "rooms" as they might be called, though compartments would probably be the better term. He sat in the small chairs, let down one of the cots and stretched out on it and sat at the table, pretending to eat, though, as yet, there was no food aboard.

"How is it?" asked Tom, as his chum reappeared in the communicating passage.

"Slick as oil!" was the enthusiastic comment. "Rides like an ocean liner."

"That's good. Then there's nothing wrong in the construction. I was afraid she might sway too much."

"There is a little swaying," admitted Ned. "But I think that will be smoothed out when you get a load in."

"I guess so," agreed Tom. "Well, come out here and try your hand at it."

"What do you mean?" Ned wanted to know.

"I want you to drive for a while. You've driven lots of cars, and I want you to get the feel of this. It seems a trifle stiff to me, and I want to see if you get the same impression. I can loosen the gear up a bit if it is."

"You mean you want me to drive your House on Wheels?" asked Ned.

"Sure! Why not?"

"I may wreck her."

"So might I. Accidents are always likely to happen. But I've got to get some other impression than my own as to how she holds the road, takes corners, and the like, and you're the best one I know to give me the information I need. Besides, you'll be coming on trips with me, and I can't always be at the wheel."

"Me come on a trip with you in this?" chuckled Ned. "Well, I like that!"

"What do you mean? Why wouldn't you come?"

"On yours and Mary's honeymoon trip? Excuse me!"

"Say, cut that stuff out!" and Tom seemed serious. "Who's said anything about a honeymoon?"

"Nobody—nobody's said a word. At least, you and Mary haven't," admitted the financial manager. "But actions speak louder than

words. And I thought that's why you were getting this canal boat in shape."

"Nothing of the sort!" exclaimed Tom sharply. "I mean—of course—that is, I—Oh, heck! Come on out here and take the wheel!"

"All right!" agreed Ned. "But don't blame me for what happens."

"I won't," and Tom steered the machine over to the side of the road to bring it to a stop out of possible traffic while he changed places with his chum.

After proceeding at a moderate rate for a mile or two, in order to familiarize himself with the brakes and controls, Ned let out a little more gas and the House on Wheels shot ahead on the smooth, level concrete highway which the two had practically to themselves.

"How does she feel, Ned?" asked Tom, as they sped along.

"Fine."

"And how does she handle?"

"Light as a cork! There's no steering strain at all."

"I'm glad of that. I wanted to make sure of it."

"But take her yourself," urged Ned, guiding the House to the side of the road in case any motorists were following. "You haven't

had the wheel when you had a chance to let out. Go ahead."

"All right," agreed Tom Swift.

He had not long been in the driver's seat, and was working up speed, when from behind came a long, shrill whistle. For a moment the young men thought it might be one of those signals connected to the exhaust pipe of some speeding motorist. But a look into the rear vision mirror showed a fast freight train approaching. Then, for the first time, Tom and Ned noticed that they were running parallel to railroad tracks and close to them.

On came the fast freight, and the engineer seemed either to be trying to attract the attention of the occupants of the peculiar car or else saluting them. Then Tom cried suddenly:

"I know what he wants!"

"What?" asked Ned.

"A race! And he's going to get it. Come on, steam baby!" yelled Tom, noting that he was now even with the locomotive. "We'll see what you can do against the House on Wheels!"

CHAPTER VIII

CUNNINGHAM ON THE WIRE

THREE sharp whistles from the locomotive seemed to indicate, on the part of its driver, an acceptance of the challenge. In answer Tom gave three toots of his own horn and the race was on.

No better speedway could have been devised for a test of the comparative powers of the fast freight and Tom Swift's House on Wheels than the concrete highway and the steel track along which the respective machines were now rushing. There was not another automobile in sight along a stretch of several miles, and no other train on the railroad. It seemed to have been made to order.

"Think you've got a chance, Tom?" yelled Ned. It was necessary to yell, for the puffing, panting locomotive was so close that its exhaust almost drowned one's voice. Nor was the House on Wheels altogether quiet, for there was a subdued rumble and roar at its present

high speed which made talking anything but easy.

"I've got a good chance!" answered Tom, with a grim tightening of his lips as his hands grasped more firmly the steering wheel. "I'm going to beat this baby."

"It's a fast freight, Tom, the fruit express. It has the right of way over everything except passenger trains. It's the crack freight of this road and makes almost as good time as some of the through passenger trains."

"Can't help that," replied the young inventor. "I'm not going to sit back and take his smoke!"

Indeed, there seemed to be little danger of this. For though the freight had crept up on the House on Wheels when she was gaining headway, the two machines were not long on even terms before Tom's House began to pull away.

But if he thought to gain an easy victory, he was mistaken. A quick glance showed that the fireman was busy shoveling coal under the boiler of the freight engine. Out belched volumes of black smoke and the increased staccato of the exhaust showed that not only was the throttle being opened wider but that the link motion was being taken up, making a corresponding quicker cut off of steam at one end of

the cylinders and a duplicate fast expulsion on the other end.

"She's creeping up on us, Tom," observed Ned, looking back when, after a little run, they had distanced the freight.

"We've got to expect that. But I've got something in reserve yet. Though I daren't let the House out for all she's worth, I can still get the accelerator down a few notches without damage. The race isn't over yet."

Tom had taken part in many speed contests, and he knew how to jockey with the best of them. He purposely let the freight slowly crawl up on even terms with him. This was due not only to the increased speed of the freight but also to Tom's slight slackening of his pace.

"I'll fool this bird!" he told Ned.

And when the engine was again up in front, so that the pilot was in line with the bumper of the House on Wheels, Tom turned on more gas, after a momentary cut-off, and again shot ahead.

He and Ned could almost see, in fancy, the chagrin on the faces of the engineer and fireman as they were thus gently mocked. But the railroad men were good sports and were not going to give up easily.

Again there was a frantic shoveling of coal, and there must have been a more advantageous adjustment of the draft, or perhaps a forced one was turned on, for suddenly the safety valve popped, which, at the speed the engine had already attained, showed an increased pressure of steam.

"He's coming right after us!" cried Ned, as they swayed along.

On no other road but this concrete highway would it have been safe to run the House on Wheels at the speed she was going. And few drivers other than Tom Swift would have been capable of handling the heavy machine with such skill and judgment.

The race was now on in earnest. Tom knew that it would not be safe to push his motor much faster. Not that it was not capable of a higher rate, but it would need to be broken in somewhat before he dared risk it. On the other hand, the locomotive was not thus limited. So if it was not yet at its maximum, there would be no danger in pushing the mechanism to that point. And if the maximum was greater than Tom's temporary one, then he would lose.

However, though forced draft was used, the big freighter appeared to have reached the limit. For perhaps half a mile she held her

own on even terms with the House on Wheels. Then Ned asked:

"Can you do a bit better, Tom?"

"I'm going to risk it," was the quick answer.

The House slowly began to draw ahead and there was no replying response on the part of the locomotive. Foot by foot Tom and Ned drew away. They had a glimpse of the fireman desperately shoveling coal, but to no purpose.

Gradually the gap that separated the two widened, and though brakemen on top of the cars yelled and seemed to urge their mates to greater efforts, it was not to be.

Tom Swift pulled away and won the race by a good margin. Not much too soon, either, for when he was several lengths ahead the railroad branched away from the highway it had been paralleling for several miles and disappeared into the woods.

In recognition of the beating by a better rival, the engineer saluted with three long blasts, to which Tom responded with like signals from his horn.

"Well, that's that!" remarked Ned, as they slowed down, for they were approaching another steep hill.

"Yes," assented Tom. "It's all over and I'm satisfied. The House on Wheels couldn't have

done better. Not a strain and not a bearing overheated," he added, as he brought the machine to a gradual stop and made a hasty examination.

"Going to take the hill?" asked Ned.

"No, we'll give her a rest and drift back," was the answer. "She has done her duty and there's no use putting on too much strain."

"That's right," agreed Ned.

He had alighted from the driver's seat with Tom to stretch his legs, and as the two were climbing back into the compartment they saw a sporty runabout flash past them. Two men, one young, were in it and they seemed much interested in the House on Wheels at the side of the road. One of them leaned out and looked back.

At the sight of his face Ned exclaimed:

"Did you notice him, Tom?"

"No. Who was he?"

"That rat-faced chap who got into your shop and tried to put this motor out of business."

"No!"

"I'm sure of it! Come on, let's chase after 'em!" proposed Ned eagerly. But Tom Swift shook his head.

"We haven't a chance," said the young inventor. "They've got a much faster machine than mine and a good start. The House wasn't

designed to race runabouts, though it can hold its own in a fast freight race. Let him go, whoever he is."

The trip back to the Swift plant was without incident, except that when Tom and Ned left the concrete highway and got into the heavier traffic they were somewhat delayed by the crowding around and near approach of other motorists who showed much curiosity regarding the strange, big machine.

"How was it, Tom?" asked his father, as they turned in through the big gates of the plant.

"Couldn't have been better, Dad," and he gave a short account of the tryout trip, including the race.

"Dat's fine!" commented Eradicate who, with the freedom of an old family servant, had been listening. "Better put her to bed now, Massa Tom, an' let her hab a good night's rest. Dat's what I used to do wif de race hosses down in ole Virginny."

"'Tisn't a bad idea," returned Tom, with a smile. "Give the motor a thorough examination and test for any possible strains," Tom told one of his men, who came out to help put the House on Wheels into the special garage that had been built for it. "I pushed the motor

pretty hard, for a new one, and I want to be sure it's in good shape."

"I'll look after it thoroughly, Mr. Swift," promised the man.

Scarcely had Tom and Ned reached the private office, where some matters awaited their attention, than the telephone bell rang. Answering it, Tom showed some amazement when he learned the identity of the man at the other end of the wire.

"This is Basil Cunningham, Mr. Swift," came the loud, somewhat rasping tones of the burly Englishman. "We'll let bygones be bygones, if it's all the same to you. I want you to take my contract and I'll add a special ten per cent. bonus if you will rush it through for me."

For a moment Tom Swift was too surprised to reply. But he gathered his wits together in a few seconds and called back:

"I wouldn't take your contract, Mr. Cunningham, for even an additional bonus of twenty per cent!"

"You won't?"

"No!"

"Is that your final answer?"

"It is."

"But look here, Mr. Swift," and Cunning-

ham's voice was almost whining now, "what objection have you to making these machines for me?"

"Will you tell me what you intend to use them for?" countered Tom.

"No, I will not!" was the answer snapped back quickly. "It isn't any of your affair!"

From the manner in which Cunningham banged the receiver on the hook, Tom felt that the Englishman was in a towering rage. Ned could only guess at half of the conversation, but Tom gave it to him in detail a little later.

"Why do you think he is so secretive about what the machines are to be used for?" the young financial manager wanted to know.

"Because there's a nigger in the woodpile—that's my opinion!"

"You still think Cunningham intends to infringe?"

"I do. The fact that he comes back to me after my first refusal shows that he has tried to get other concerns to take up his work and has failed."

"It would seem so," agreed Ned.

"Well, this all goes to show that my first impression is right," went on Tom. "Cunningham is a crook, I'm sure."

"Then we're better off leaving him alone," commented Ned.

They were about to go over some business papers again when the telephone rang once more.

"You answer, Ned," directed Tom. "If it's Cunningham say I will have no further communication with him!"

Ned picked up the instrument, listened a moment, and then cried:

"What's that? Who are you? What do you mean? Don't be a coward! Give me your name!"

"What's the matter?" asked Tom when Ned, by impatiently jiggling the receiver hook, indicated that the person at the other end of the wire had hung up. "Who was talking, Cunningham?"

"I don't think so. But it must have been one of his men. For he said: 'Tom Swift will regret not taking this contract! He'd better watch out!' I tried to make him tell who he was, but he wouldn't."

"So," said Tom musingly, and with a little smile. "they are beginning to threaten, are they? Well, I'm ready for them!"

CHAPTER IX

DISMAL MOUNTAIN

"WELL, Ned, I guess that's about all!"

"Unless you want to put in another piece of bacon," was Ned Newton's rejoinder to his chum's implied question.

The two were sitting in the House on Wheels, about a week after the sensational race with the freight train. In the intervening time much work had been done on the new invention. The motor was thoroughly gone over, tuned up, and minor adjustments made. The furnishing of the interior of the House was completed, from kitchen articles to bed linen, and the vehicle was now equipped for a long or short journey, as the owner desired. Ned's particular province was the pantry, and he had furnished it, as Tom said, "with enough grub to last a month."

Following another and more severe tryout of the machine after the freight train race, Tom had suggested to his chum that they go on

a week's crosscountry tour to further test the House on Wheels under varying conditions.

"Have you any particular object in view?" asked Ned.

"Well, I thought maybe I'd surprise Mary," was the answer.

"Surprise her?" questioned Ned. "What do you mean?"

"We could call on the Winthrops where she is staying."

"Good idea. But where is it?"

"Just outside Chesterport."

"Chesterport!" exclaimed Ned, with every indication of excitement. "You mean Chesterport in this state?"

"Sure. Why not? What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing. Only— Well, say, what are you going to do after you surprise Mary in Chesterport?"

"After that we can keep on touring, if you like. We can go as far beyond Chesterport as you like."

"We won't have to go far," murmured Ned, and there was a strange look in his eyes. "Why didn't you tell me before that Mary had gone to Chesterport?"

"I didn't attach any importance to it, for one thing," answered Tom. "And, for all I know, I may have mentioned it to you a dozen times."

"No you didn't, or I'd have remembered it."

"What did you mean by saying we won't have to go far beyond Chesterport?" asked Tom. "What's there of such importance?"

"It's queer you never heard of it," murmured Ned, looking over some papers he hastily took from his pocket.

"For the love of Pete! Heard of what?" cried Tom, a bit exasperated by his chum's curious manner.

"Dismal Mountain! The peak of mystery!" exclaimed Ned. "If you haven't made any other plans after you pay Mary a visit, what's the matter with keeping on to Dismal Mountain?"

"Nothing the matter, as far as I can see," admitted Tom. "But it is the first time I've ever heard of the beast and I'd like a little information. Why is the mountain dismal and what's the mystery about it?"

"It's dismal because of the mystery," was the reply. "And as for what that is, smarter lads than you have asked the question and haven't been answered."

"Oh, cut it out! Be yourself!" advised Tom, with a laugh. "Get down to brass tacks and let's have a little first hand information."

"That I can't give you, much as I'd like to," said Ned, with a serious air, not at all in keep-

ing with Tom's bantering words. "All I know about Dismal Mountain is what I've heard or read, but that's plenty. I've made a few notes here, and——"

"I should say you had!" exclaimed Tom, looking at the documents his chum pulled from his pocket. "Looks like an election ballot."

"Well, they're mostly clippings from papers," went on Ned; "though I have made some notes myself of what folks have told me. Look here! Those are some newspaper clippings."

He spread a sheaf of them out on the table in the living room of the House on Wheels where this talk was taking place. The House was in the garage, but was all ready to run out at a moment's notice.

Tom saw that the clippings bore various heads, such as: "Dismal Mountain Smokes Again," "Dismal Mountain Claims Another Victim," and this appeared to be an account of a man who had disappeared somewhere in the fastness of the forest around the place.

"You don't need to read them all," advised Ned. "I can shorten it by summarizing it for you. Dismal Mountain is some distance south of Chesterport—just how far I don't know. It's in a lonely section of the country, away from any town or city, though there are people

living not far from the foot of the mountain.

"Some of these folks say the mountain is haunted. Others hold that it is the resort of present-day moonshiners and bootleggers. I think that comes as near the mark as any. Another version is that the strange sights and sounds that are seen and heard are made by the moonshiners or bootleggers to scare would-be investigators away."

"I can well believe that," murmured Tom. "What else?"

"Well, there's another theory that a squad of bandits or road agents make the glens of Dismal Mountain their hiding places," went on Ned. "They lie in wait there and hold up trucks carrying big loads of valuable merchandise, such as bales of silk. There may also be hijackers on the mountain—men who make a practice of raiding the trucks sent out by bootleggers. Of course the latter being engaged in breaking the law themselves, can't call on the law to protect them. So the hijackers have it easy."

"Sounds like a right bad sort of a place," commented Tom.

"It's fully as bad as it sounds," declared Ned. "Not long ago, as you can see by this clipping, there was a train hold-up not far from Dismal Mountain. Some of the bandits are believed

to have fled to that place and may still be in hiding."

"This is getting worse and more interesting!" exclaimed Tom Swift. "I only hope you aren't stringing me," he added, with a sharp look at his chum.

"Indeed I'm not kidding you!" expostulated Ned. "You can read it there for yourself. Of course I don't guarantee the truth of any of this, but if I'm fooled, so are the papers."

"It looks authentic," admitted Tom, when he had glanced through several clippings. "At least there have been a number of crimes committed in the vicinity of this Dismal Mountain, and it may hold the criminals."

"That's what I think," said Ned. "And when I heard just now for the first time that you are going to Chesterport, which is the nearest town of any size to the mountain, I thought it would be a good chance to visit the mysterious place."

"You're right!" exclaimed Tom. "I'm glad you mentioned this. I wouldn't have missed it for the world. It's queer I never heard about the mountain of mystery before, and yet it isn't a hundred miles away."

"It is only recently that all these stories became public," stated Ned. "Besides, you were so busy working on your talking pictures and

since then on this House on Wheels that I don't blame you for not having heard of this Dismal Mountain."

"It's going to be just the thing!" cried Tom, his face lighting with pleasure. "With Mary away, I needed something to stimulate me and keep me from going stale. This will do the trick! Let's see if we can't run down this mystery!"

"I'm with you!" echoed Ned.

He was putting away his clippings and other information and Tom was going to ask about the roads to Dismal Mountain and the possibility of taking the House on Wheels when they heard a noise at the outer door of the garage where the new machine stood. Then the handle was cautiously tried.

"Look!" whispered Ned, touching Tom on the arm and pointing to the latch that was slowly being raised.

CHAPTER X

JEALOUSY

TOGETHER Tom Swift and Ned Newton watched the door of the garage being cautiously opened. There was something peculiar in this. In the first place, no one who had a right to swing the door would have been thus cautious about it. In the second place, no one was supposed to be in that part of the shop just now except Tom and Ned. The young inventor had given orders that he was to be left undisturbed with his financial manager to make a final inspection of his new machine.

Rightly arguing that no one who had a right to be there would try to enter in this manner, Tom Swift decided to find out who was opening the door, and in such a manner as to capture the intruder if possible. Accordingly, he made a sign to Ned to keep quiet and then began creeping toward the door in as stealthy a manner as it was being opened, which was a fraction of an inch at a time.

Ned, seeing his chum's intention, followed him, and the two were close to the door when, unfortunately, Tom stumbled over a piece of wood left by one of the workman. The noise, though slight, was enough to alarm the person on the other side of the door. It was at once pulled shut and footsteps could be heard in hasty retreat outside.

"After him!" yelled Tom, caution now being useless, and he and Ned made a dart for the opening. They swung back the door, but it had stuck a little, and the two youths were just in time to see a crouching, running figure some distance away.

"Catch him!" cried Ned.

It was easier said than done. When Tom and Ned reached the place where they had caught a glimpse of the running figure there was no sign of the fugitive. Though an alarm was at once raised and a search made, no stranger was discovered on the place.

"Well, what do you make of it?" asked Tom, when the two had returned to where the House on Wheels stood.

"Hanged if I know what to make of it," Ned replied. "Whoever it was thought no one was in here, and they thought they could either steal your House or else damage it."

"It would be hard to steal it," replied Tom.

"But it wouldn't take much to wreck it. Looks as if some of the old gangs were after me, or else some new one."

"I'm inclined to the latter theory," said Ned. "And the newest one who would logically have it in for you is Cunningham. Isn't that the case?"

"I suppose so. Yet I can't understand a man of his business ability—and I must admit he is shrewd—being foolish enough to risk an attack such as this might have been."

"Unless he is so angry that he hasn't any common sense left," suggested Ned.

"That may be it, yes. Well, the sooner we get started away from here the better it will be for us."

"Do you think you'll escape your enemies, Tom, by starting on a trip in the House on Wheels?" asked Ned.

"Not exactly! We've had experiences before in being trailed by those who wanted to injure me or my father. But it isn't as easy for them to get at me when I'm on the move. I can keep them guessing."

"There's something in that," admitted Ned. "Well, I won't be sorry to be on the move, either."

It was two days after this, following a try-out of the House on Wheels fully loaded and

equipped, that Tom and Ned started on what they thought was to be a pleasant little excursion, but which turned out to be the beginning of a series of strange events.

"I'll let you know when I get to Chesterport, Dad," said Tom, when bidding his father good-bye.

"Yes, do," urged the aged inventor. "This is a different machine from any you have traveled in, and I should like to know how it behaves. We might make some money out of putting them on the market."

"I'll think about that."

Ned made his farewells to Helen Morton and then, amid a chorus of good wishes on the part of Mr. Damon and the shop force, the two young men started off in the strange machine which attracted much attention all along the road.

"Off to Chesterport!" gaily exclaimed Ned, as he sat beside Tom in the driver's seat.

"And the mountain of mystery!" added the young inventor.

They reached Chesterport about the middle of the afternoon, but instead of proceeding up the main street to the residence of the Winthrops, who, Tom had told Ned, occupied a mansion in an exclusive part of the town, the House on Wheels, under the guidance of its

inventor, was headed into a vacant lot near an automobile garage.

"What's the idea?" inquired Ned, in surprise. "Something gone wrong?"

"No. Why?"

"Why don't you run her up in front of the Winthrop's and call on Mary in style?"

"That's just it, Ned. I'm afraid the Winthrop family wouldn't like this kind of style. And it might embarrass Mary. You see, the Winthrop people are old-fashioned, conservative people, dating back to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, or something like that. Up to a few years ago the older Mrs. Winthrop would never ride in anything but the family carriage. She did grudgingly consent to an auto, in time. Her daughter-in-law isn't much more liberal, and I'm afraid if we dashed up and stopped in front of their place with this rather gaudy affair, the ladies might have a fit and conclude that I wasn't the sort of person Mary ought to marry."

"I see!" laughed Ned. "Well, maybe the House is a bit too much like a circus van to park in front of a proud old lady's house. I see your point. But what are you going to do?"

"Oh, we'll leave the House here under the eye of this garage man and then you and I will hire a taxi and call on Mary in style."

"Count me out. I'll stay with the House."

"Nothing doing! You go with me!"

The young men had been wearing old garments, for they had anticipated having to do some work on the car. But there was a miniature bathroom in the House on Wheels and after washing and changing to fresh garments, the two young men hired a taxi from the garage, near which they had left the House on Wheels and went calling.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you!" Mary exclaimed impulsively at the sight of Tom and Ned. "Why didn't you send me word you were coming?"

"We didn't decide to come until so short a time ago," Tom answered, "that we didn't really have time."

"He wasn't sure his old House could make the grade," chuckled Ned.

"Oh, then you have the wonderful House with you!" cried Mary.

"Yes, er—I—now—what pocket did I put it in, Ned?" asked Tom in mock anxiety, as he searched through his garments. "I know I had it when we came in, but——"

"Think you're smart, don't you?" mocked Mary.

Grace Winthrop came in just then to be introduced, and she and Ned paired off quite

well, "considering everything," as Tom said afterward.

The story of the trip was told and both girls asked to be taken for a ride in the House on Wheels, a petition that was quickly granted. Grace Winthrop shared none of her grandmother's inhibitions against modernism!

"Oh, boys, you're just in time!" exclaimed Mary, as they were having some lemonade out on the shady piazza. "Aren't they, Grace?"

"In time for what?" Tom wanted to know.

"The dance!" answered Mary. "We're having one to-night. You can stay, can't you, Tom? And you, Ned?" She looked appealingly at Tom.

"Afraid not," he answered. "We have a number of engagements, and our schedule——"

"Oh, Tom Swift!"

Mary's disappointment was so genuine that Tom, who had been a little stiff with her at first, relented and said:

"We haven't dress suits with us."

"It's an informal dance," Grace made haste to say, and after being urged a bit more the two visitors consented to come to the affair that evening. They refused an invitation to dinner, as both Tom and Ned wanted to see how it would be to get their own meal on the electric stove in the House on Wheels.

The dance was a great success. Ned found Grace Winthrop a gracious hostess, and he did not seem to miss Helen much.

In fact, he was having such a good time that it was not until late in the evening that he noticed Tom sitting by himself out on the porch and looking in one of the long windows at the dancing floor. Among the couples foxtrotting about were Mary and a young fellow named Floyd Barton to whom Ned had been introduced.

"What's the matter, Tom?" asked Ned, who had come out for a breath of air. "Hurt your foot?"

"Hurt my foot! No! What makes you ask that?"

"You aren't dancing."

"I haven't had much chance!" was the somewhat grumpish answer, and Ned saw his chum's gaze following Mary and her partner. To do him justice, Barton was a fine dancer.

"Oh, ho!" mused Ned to himself, as he took in the situation. "Poor old Tom is jealous!"

CHAPTER XI

TRAILING THE MYSTERY

THE next day, after a late, lazy sleep in the bunks of the House on Wheels, Tom Swift and Ned Newton, in fulfillment of a promise made the night before, called to take Mary and Grace for a ride in Tom's latest invention.

Tom and his chum called in a taxi to take the girls out to the House on Wheels, for the young inventor rightly guessed that Mrs. Winthrop would not appreciate the sensation that would be caused should the big auto stop in front of her house.

"Hello!" Mary called to Tom and Ned as she came downstairs with Grace to meet them. "Did you have a good time last night?"

"Fine!" answered Ned, who had thoroughly enjoyed himself.

"Are you all ready?" asked Tom, trying to smile but not making a great success of it. He seemed anxious to avoid answering the question. But Mary was not to be put off.

"I asked if you had a good time last night, Tom Swift," and Mary's voice had a new quality in it. "Aren't you going to answer me?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon. Of course! It was a lovely affair. And I must say you danced very well, Mary—you and Mr. Barton."

There was something in Tom's tone that made Mary look sharply at him, but she said nothing more then.

"Well, are you all ready for the thrill of your lives?" asked Ned, to cover the little moment of embarrassment that followed the interchange between Mary and Tom.

"Does the machine go very fast?" asked Grace.

"Not at all," Tom made haste to say. "It isn't a racer, by any means. It's just a comfortable way of traveling, that's all. There won't be any particular thrill."

"I'm eager to see it since its completion," said Mary, and Ned noticed that her manner toward Tom had changed a bit.

However, once they were started, the party was gay enough and Ned thought perhaps his chum's natural jealousy would wear off. He learned, by judicious questions put to Grace Winthrop, that Floyd Barton was a rich young man of the neighborhood who had been paying

Mary much attention since her arrival in Chesterport.

"Mr. Barton thinks Mary is a lovely girl," said Grace to Ned.

"Well, he is certainly right," was the answer. "So does Tom Swift."

"Oh, well, that's different. Mr. Barton is just a very good friend. Of course I know that Tom and Mary are engaged. But a girl must be nice to those who are nice to her."

"Then you'd better start right in on me!" challenged Ned, and the two laughed.

This was more than Mary and Tom were doing just then. They seemed to be talking seriously on the rear seat of the taxi, Ned and Grace occupying the auxiliary folding seats ahead.

However, once the House on Wheels was reached, the air cleared a bit. Both girls went into raptures over the House, though Mary had seen it before, when it was almost completed. They reveled in the appointments and said the kitchen was "just darling," using so many other adjectives to praise the other sections that Tom and Ned felt quite set up over having had a hand in turning out the machine.

The House on Wheels was taken for a spin into the country with the girls as guests, and

the party remained out all day, eating "on board," if that be the proper term. In the evening, when the return to Chesterport was made, Tom and Mary seemed to have patched up their little differences. Ned had an inkling as to what was at the bottom of the trouble when he overheard Tom say:

"Well, but you didn't need to dance every number with him, did you?"

"I didn't! I danced with you three times! If I had known you were coming I'd have saved more for you."

"I'm sorry I didn't send you word," murmured Tom.

"So am I," replied Mary, and then they talked of other things.

But that Tom still felt jealous pangs was evident the next day, for the boys remained over for a lawn party Grace had arranged in honor of Mary. There was no dancing this time, for the affair was held out of doors. But Floyd Barton was there, with other young men, and even Ned, in what few moments he spent away from Grace Winthrop, could not help noticing that Mary was very often in the company of the young Chesterport man.

However, she gave Tom some attention and called him to her side when she had to preside at a little game. She seemed very sweet and

gracious, but there was a lowering look on Tom's face that did not altogether vanish, Ned noticed.

At the close of the lawn party Mary accompanied Mr. Barton to the gate to bid him farewell. When she came back Tom further showed the canker that was eating him.

"Can't you stay over one more day?" Grace Winthrop was asking Ned, who had announced that their plans called for starting off the next morning.

"I'd like to," Ned replied. "But of course——"

"We're going to pull out first thing to-morrow!" broke in Tom, with more bruskness than seemed necessary.

"Oh, in that case then you won't be here," said Mary, and her voice was tantalizingly cool. "I thought you were having a good time."

"We are!" exclaimed Ned.

"Too good," said Tom. "I guess you're having a good time too, aren't you, Mary?" His question was rather pointed.

"Who, me? Oh, yes! Grace has entertained me lavishly, and——"

"I guess she hasn't been doing all the entertaining," and Tom pretended to be much interested in a troublesome hangnail.

"Oh, of course her friends have been aw-

fully sweet to me," said Mary, purposely misunderstanding. "Well, if you boys won't stay, you won't! Where are you going, Tom?"

"Oh, off on a little exploring trip," and he glanced toward Ned to make sure he would not mention Dismal Mountain, since they had agreed it would be better to keep their plans secret. "Got to try out the House under all sorts of conditions."

"I suppose so," agreed Grace. "Well, can't you stop off again on your way back?"

"We'll try," was all Tom would promise, though Ned was enthusiastic when he said:

"I sure would like to!"

"Do try, then," urged Mary. "I'm having such a lovely time on this visit that I want every one else to have fun, too. And you have been working hard, haven't you, Tom?"

"A bit, yes."

"Well, now you'd better take a rest on this trip. Don't think about business and don't run into any danger. Will you?"

She crossed the room and stood near him, while Ned and Grace went outside.

"Will you, Tom?"

"Will I what?"

"Be careful to keep out of danger."

"Oh, I— Who'd care if I did get into danger?" His voice was hard.

"Who'd care? Well, I like that, Tom Swift! Wouldn't your father care, and my father and mother, and Ned and Koku and Eradicate and—lots of folks?"

"Anybody else?" asked Tom, with a half smile.

"Of course, you silly boy! I would! Is that what you wanted me to say?"

It would seem from Tom's pleased answer that it was.

So the little rift in the heavens appeared to have passed.

"All hands on deck!"

Ned Newton heard this hail from the depths of drowsy slumber as he turned over in his cot the next morning.

"What's the row?" he asked sleepily.

"All hands on deck!" repeated Tom. "Come on, if we're going to get started."

"What's the matter?" yawned Ned, parting the curtains and peering out. "Are you the little early bird after the earlier worm this morning?"

"Somewhat. But we've been loafing long enough. Let's get on the move if we're going to."

They washed, dressed and had breakfast, and then, having paid their garage bill and taken on a supply of gas and oil, they set out down

the main road of Chesterport, having said good-bye to the girls the night before.

They were on the road to Branchville, beyond which was the beginning of the hills that rose to their limit in the peak known locally as Dismal Mountain.

"I hope we run across a batch of moonshiners, some train bandits, and half a dozen road agents!" declared Tom, as he grasped the steering wheel.

"Ah, ha!" mused Ned. "The little green bug is still biting him!"

CHAPTER XII

THE WARNING

THOUGH not a very great distance separated the vicinity of the mountain of mystery from Chesterport, Tom and Ned decided they would occupy two days on the trip. By hard driving they might have covered the trail in a day and a night, but there was no special need of haste. Then, too, Tom Swift did not want to push the motor of his House on Wheels to the safe limit even, for he wanted to get it well broken in and limbered up before trying any stunts with it.

"This is the life!" sang Ned, as they rolled along the level highway. "Eh, Tom?"

"It sure is! Makes a fellow glad to be alive!"

"This is one of the best things you ever turned out of your shop," went on Ned, indicating by a comprehensive motion of his hand the vehicle in which they were riding.

As they motored along, their big car attracted much attention, not only from passing machines but on the part of persons in towns and villages through which they passed.

Noon came almost before the two travelers realized it, and, being then on a country road with no settlement in sight, they pulled off the highway, stopped under some trees and near a little stream, and prepared to have lunch.

The pantry had been well stocked, and Ned and Tom, being used to camping, had no difficulty in preparing a light meal, part of which was set to cooking on the electric stove. In a little while there was a most appetizing odor in the air and either this, or perhaps a sight of the big machine itself, caused a passing man to stop.

He was obviously a hobo, a rather dirty, unshaven and ragged specimen of tramp. Yet his face had an impudent, roguish smile and his manner was ingratiating as he shuffled up in the dust until he was opposite the House, outside of which Tom and Ned sat on stools in the shade. They were waiting for the potatoes to boil.

"How's business, Boss—maybe I ought to say Bosses?" asked the tramp in a hoarse voice. He leered and smiled.

"What do you mean—business?" asked Tom.

"The lunch-wagon business." The tramp seemed surprised at the question. Very evidently he took the House on Wheels for one of those roadside refreshment places.

"We haven't opened up yet," said Ned, carrying on the delusion.

"Smells like you had," commented the tramp, hungrily sniffing. "If that ain't hash and onions cooking may I never eat another meal!"

He was vehement about it. From his looks he did not appear to have eaten a meal recently.

"Is it hash and onions?" he asked.

"Guessed it first shot," commented Tom.

"But I can't see how you can expect to do much business here," went on the hobo. "This road ain't much traveled."

"We're our own best customers," chuckled Ned, and at the man's look of surprise he added enough information to show the nature of the House on Wheels.

"Well, then it's a washout as far as it goes with me," sighed the tramp. "I was goin' to ask if I couldn't do you folks some work for the price of a hand-out, but if yours is a private concern——"

"Oh, I guess we can manage to get you something," said Tom good-naturedly. A little later when he and Ned were eating in the combined kitchen and dining room, they handed

the tramp a generous plateful, for which he expressed gratitude.

"Travel much in these parts?" asked Ned, as the hobo was about to shuffle along.

"More or less, Boss."

"Ever been to Dismal Mountain?"

"No, I can't say I have. And, what's more, I don't intend to! So if you folks is aimin' to have me go there to work for what you jest give me, count it out! I'm sorry, but——"

"Nothing like that," interrupted Tom. "I just wanted to know if we were on the right road to get there."

"Yes, you're on the right road," the tramp admitted, with a shake of his head. "But what for you fellers want to go to Dismal Mountain, gets me!"

"What's the matter with the place anyhow?" asked Ned.

"Oh, I don't know's there's much the matter with the *place*," and the man emphasized the word. "It's the birds that hang out around there."

"Ghosts?" asked Tom, with a smile.

"Ghosts!" exploded the tramp. "I'd rather meet ghosts than some of the guys what hangs out there. Tough babies—an' I don't mean maybe!"

"A rough crowd, eh?" asked Ned.

"Tougher'n what I like," admitted the tramp. "I don't claim to be no saint, but I'm pretty decent compared to some of the hard-boiled eggs that hide around Dismal Mountain."

"Then you wouldn't advise us to go there?" Tom asked.

"It's none of my business, Boss," was the answer. "You know what your own game is better'n what I do. But I wouldn't advise you to take any valuables with you when you go to Dismal Mountain."

"Thanks," murmured Ned. "We aren't wearing any diamonds."

"Some of the guys there'll steal the laces out of your shoes," went on the tramp.

"Just what kind of criminals hang out there?" inquired Tom.

"A kind I never travel with," was the quick rejoinder. "I'm a bum—I don't deny it—and I'm not lookin' for work. But I'd sooner work than pull off some o' the things that those babies do. Keep your eyes open if you go there."

"We will," promised Ned.

The tramp shuffled away, and when the two chums were again alone Ned looked at Tom and asked:

"Think we'd better follow through?"

"Sure! Why not?"

"Well, there are only two of us and if there are some tough gangs up there, or even a small band, we might run into trouble."

"I'm not going to run away from trouble," declared the young inventor. "Maybe it would have been wise to have had at least Koku along. But I'm not going back after him. We'll go on to Dismal Mountain and see what's there. Are you with me?"

"I sure am, Tom!"

They rested after the noon meal, washed the dishes in the near-by brook, to save the supply of water in the auto tanks, and then journeyed on in leisurely fashion. They expected to reach the mountain of mystery the following night.

It was dusk when they stopped the House on the outskirts of a little village and prepared the evening meal. Then, having disposed of that, they decided to go into town for the sake of the exercise and to see if they could buy a paper.

They hired a couple of boys from a house near where they had parked their machine to stand guard over it while they were in town, and one can well imagine with what pride the youngsters accepted the commission.

"We won't let nobody come near it until you come back!" promised the older boy.

"I got my baseball bat if they do!" chimed in his brother.

Stopping for an ice-cream soda in the only store of the town that dispensed this refreshment and having bought a paper, Ned and Tom lingered a while to listen to the somewhat excited and loud talk that was going on amid a crowd of men in the place, evidently the headquarters of the village gossips.

"And they got clean away!" one man declared. "Took every darn cent, too!"

"Did they hurt the guards?" asked another.

"Shot at 'em, but missed. It was all over quick."

"Didn't they see which way the robbers went?" some one wanted to know.

"Off toward Dismal Mountain," another answered.

"Might have known it!" commented several. "That place ought to be wiped out."

"This sounds interesting," remarked Tom to Ned in a low voice. "I'm going to butt in."

Accordingly, he addressed the principal speaker and asked what all the talk was about.

"Highway robbery, that's what!" came the vehement answer. "A couple of men guarding the pay roll of the shoe factory here were held up this afternoon and robbed of about four thousand dollars."

"I just now heard you mention Dismal Mountain," went on Tom. "Is that a hang-out for highwaymen?"

"That and worse," was the reply. "Dismal Mountain is a good place for honest folks to stay away from."

"Well, my friend and I claim to be honest," said Tom, indicating Ned. "But we are on our way to Dismal Mountain and——"

"Don't go!" exclaimed an old man in the store. "I know more about that place than most folks, and my advice to you is not to go there. Unless you're officers aiming to arrest the scoundrels that hide there," he added hopefully.

"No, we aren't officers," stated Ned.

"We were just going there to find out what gives the place its bad name," added Tom. "We would rather like to solve the mystery."

"Well, be warned by me and keep away," went on the old man. "I used to live not far from the place," he added, "and I don't want to see any more such goings on as I witnessed."

"What were they?" asked Ned.

"I couldn't tell you," was the answer, with a dubious shake of the head. "I've seen men go up that mountain and never come down. There were queer noises and queer lights. Nobody that had a valuable horse near Dismal

Mountain ever left him in a field over night. If they did he wasn't there in the morning."

"This sounds interesting," said Tom.

"*Interesting*, young man!" exclaimed the speaker. "It's *dangerous!* That's what it is! *Dangerous!*"

There was so much interest in the recent hold-up that the departure of Tom and Ned was little noticed. They went back to the House on Wheels where they found the two boys had been faithful to their trust, and, having paid and dismissed them, the two travelers turned in for the night.

"Well, what about it?" asked Tom of his chum when they arose the next morning and found it raining and blowing. "Shall we lay over?"

"Not on my account," declared Ned. "This storm doesn't seem to be going to amount to much."

"Oh, it wasn't of the storm I was speaking."

"What then?"

"The warnings we had last night against proceeding to Dismal Mountain. If you——"

"Nothing doing!" interrupted Ned. "I'll go with you to the end of the trail!"

"That settles it. We keep on!" cried Tom.

After a hearty breakfast, they took their places on the front seat and started off. For a

time they followed a good concrete road, but it soon branched off, and their way lay along a highway that had once been good but which was so no longer.

As the day advanced, taking the travelers farther on their way, the storm increased. By afternoon and after lunch, which they ate while moving along, they were in the midst of a terrific downpour with a wind which reached at times the velocity of a gale.

"She seems to weather it all right, though," remarked Ned, indicating their traveling House.

"Standing up fine!" agreed Tom, much pleased with the staunchness of his latest invention. "We'll be almost there by night in spite of the storm and the bad road."

Hardly had he spoken than there was a fiercer burst of wind, which dashed the rain like hail against the protecting glass in front. Just then Ned pointed ahead as a loud crash sounded and cried:

"Look out, Tom! Stop! Danger!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE DESERTED HOUSE

Tom Swift, ever on the alert when driving any of his machines, from the humble motorcycle to the more complicated apparatuses of the air or undersea, lived up to his name in bringing the House on Wheels to a quick but skillful stop as Ned Newton uttered the exclamation of warning.

It was just in time, for the front wheels were almost against a big rotten tree that the gale had blown down across the highway leading toward Dismal Mountain. Tom's attention had been taken momentarily by some of his dashboard gages, so he had not seen the sway of the tree before it fell. But Ned's quick eyes had sensed the danger and had given ample warning.

"Close call, that!" commented Tom, as he leaned back after pulling hard on the emergency brake.

"Don't want 'em any closer," agreed Ned,

as he looked through the driving rain at the fallen tree. "If we had gone full tilt into that it might have scratched some of the paint off the House."

"Worse than that," assented Tom. "It's lucky you yelled at me when you did."

"Well, what's the next move?" asked Ned.

"Put on our umbrella clothes and see if we can cut that tree away," suggested Tom. "I don't believe we can very well turn around and I don't want to navigate backward."

"No, it won't be easy," agreed Ned. "Well, let's hop to it. I don't believe there's much traffic on this road, but what there is we don't want to hold up."

"Speaking of hold-ups," said Tom grimly, "maybe we could get some of the hold-up residents of Dismal Mountain to come to our help."

"They don't show up in any great numbers," remarked Ned, as he made his way back into the interior of the car to get his raincoat and rubber boots, which Tom had designated as "umbrella clothes."

They were in a lonely part of the country, in the midst of an extensive piece of woods, it appeared, on a seldom-traveled road, about at the beginning of the big peak known as Dismal Mountain. They had seen no habitation for some time, nor had they met any other travelers,

which last was not remarkable, considering the state of the weather.

Tom carried a set of emergency tools in his House on Wheels and among these were a couple of axes. In a short time he and Ned, fortified against the elements, which appeared to be doing their worst just now, were attacking the fallen tree with their sharp tools.

Fortunately the tree was pretty well rotted, and though it was large in diameter, the trunk was punk-like in its character and the axes easily bit into it. Chopping out small sections, the two travelers dragged them to one side of the road until at last, after an hour's work, they had cleared a passage for their auto and for any other vehicles that might follow.

"Though if there are any other people foolish enough to drive up here in a storm like this, they ought to be made to chop their own trees," commented Tom, as he got back on the seat.

"It wasn't so bad when we started up here," Ned reminded his chum.

"Oh, I'm not kicking!" Tom made haste to say. "I'm just talking to hear my own voice. Whew, it's going to be a nasty night!"

"It already is one!" declared Ned, for darkness was rapidly falling and they had no idea of what lay beyond them.

"Want to stay here?" asked Tom, always

willing to give in on the matter of stopping for the night.

"No, the road's too narrow in case anything else comes along, though I don't believe it will. Let's push on, and maybe we'll get to some decent place where we can pull up."

The motor, which had been stopped while the fallen tree was being chopped away, was again put in motion and once more the House on Wheels began the gradual but steady ascent that led up Dismal Mountain, by this time in the young men's minds, a veritable mountain of mystery.

For about a mile the road was fairly good and firm. After that either the highway had not been kept in repair or the heavy rain was washing it away rapidly, for the House on Wheels careened from one rut into another until it was swaying like a circus camel in the parade.

"Not so good!" commented Ned, as he banged up against the side of the seat after a particularly heavy lurch.

"It is getting a bit thick and heavy," agreed Tom, trying to peer ahead into the gloom which was pierced by two powerful headlights of the auto. But powerful as they were, the gleams of the lamps appeared to be swallowed up in

the dark trees on either side of the road and by the surface of the highway itself.

A comparatively light surface is needed to reflect the gleams of any auto lamps properly, as you have noticed when driving first on concrete and then on asphalt. You can see twice as well on the former as on the latter. And in driving through woods on a dirt road, nearly all the illumination is absorbed so that you get the benefit of very little of it.

It was so in the case of Tom and Ned, and though for a little way in front of the wheels they could see where they were going, beyond ten feet all was gloom and darkness.

It was still raining hard and the wind was blowing. Tom had set in motion the wiper of the glass in front of him so the drops did not accumulate and distort his vision. But he needed all the artificial aids he could command on a night like this and under the circumstances.

For the first time it began to be apparent to him and Ned that perhaps they had done rather a foolish thing to come to Dismal Mountain in this large van-like car. It was not exactly the kind of a machine for prospect work, not being small or flexible enough for quick maneuvering.

On the other hand, it was a portable base of supplies and the occupants of it could stop wherever they found themselves and be comfortable, which was more than could be said for a small car. So they kept plugging along.

The motor was pulling powerfully. Tom was glad of this for he knew he would need all the power he could command when they got into the upper slopes where the grades would be stiffer.

On and on, up and up, the House on Wheels was driven until Ned began to wonder where his chum would stop. He did not like to suggest a halt, for there seemed to be no good place to pull up. The road was still narrow. The House took up considerable room and there were places where trees grew so close to each side of the road that it seemed impossible to squeeze the big vehicle through.

But, somehow, Tom managed it, though once both sides of the car lightly brushed great trunks that would have taken hours on the part of a skilled lumberman to fell. However, luck was with the two venturesome travelers.

After a stiff ascent, in which Tom had to drop back to second gear for one of the few times since the trip started, they came to a somewhat level stretch, as was evidenced by the

easier pull on the motor. Ned, always enthusiastic, exclaimed:

"Hurray! We're up!"

"Not half!" exclaimed Tom. "Don't fool yourself."

"Oh, gee!" sighed Ned.

"But we may reach a place where it will be wise to stop for the rest of the night," went on Tom, trying in vain to pierce the dark forest ahead and on either side. "The road is wider here and we can pull off it with a chance for something else to pass."

"Nobody but us two are crazy enough to be out here on a night like this," commented the financial manager.

"Guess that's about right," assented Tom. "Still, it's best not to take any chances. I'll go along a bit farther and then we'll pull up and call it a day's work."

The going was better until there was a sudden lurch to one side.

"In a hole!" cried Tom, and he quickly went into second and then into first gear in an effort to pull out.

However, it was not to be. The House on Wheels slowly settled down and not all the power of the motor could stir it. Finally Tom realized that he was only sinking the rear wheels

deeper into the mud by churning them around.

"We've got to dig out!" he told Ned.

There was no help for it. Once more they donned boots and raincoats and, hanging a portable electric light over the bogged side, they saw where the right front wheel had sunk into a deep hole. It took the two the best part of an hour to dig a slope in front and fill it with small stones to make a firm surface so the machine could climb out. This the auto did after several false starts, and once more they were on their way.

The road shortly broadened and the trees were cut back from the highway into a small clearing. This opening enabled the two to see better, and in the gleam of the powerful lamps Ned noticed, just ahead, on the right, a big house, from which, however, no lights showed. As the car approached, it could be seen that the place was an old, deserted mansion that had once been the stately home of some wealthy person, for there were extensive grounds.

"Look!" exclaimed Ned.

"I see it," answered Tom. "Nobody home from the looks of it, but we can pull up there and stop for the night. What say?"

"Suits me!"

Accordingly, Tom guided the big car into what seemed to have once been a drive and

he and Ned both experienced a feeling of relief. But if they had known to what adventures the deserted house was a preface they might well have hesitated.

"What do you make it out to be?" joked Ned, as the House on Wheels was brought to a stop at one side of the old mansion. "Is it a hang-out of bootleggers or road agents?"

"Take your choice," Tom answered, in equally light vein. "Luckily, we don't have to depend on them for supper. We roll our own."

"And I'm going to roll mine right soon!" added Ned. "Boy, I'm hungry and I don't mean perhaps!"

"Be with you in just a minute," Tom said, shutting off the motor and putting on the emergency brake. He was glad to note that the ground seemed firm beneath the wheels.

As he and Ned were alighting, thinking to have a look around the outside of the deserted house before getting something to eat, Ned uttered a low exclamation which Tom heard above the noise of the rain that was coming down more gently now.

"What is it?" whispered the young inventor.

"Did you hear a noise in there?" asked Ned in cautious tones.

CHAPTER XIV

A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE

LIKE game dogs, Tom Swift and Ned Newton froze in their tracks and stood in the rain near the deserted house, waiting for they knew not what. It was a lonesome, dreary place, dense woods being all around them, and ahead, though some miles distant, the sinister summit of Dismal Mountain with its suggestion of mystery. Only the fact that the warm, comfortable and cozily lighted House on Wheels was near by heartened the young men. They were rather tired from their trip, with fighting the elements, and digging the heavy auto out of bog holes.

For several seconds they stood there, Tom seeking to tune his ears to what Ned had said he had heard—a noise in the deserted house. But as no sounds came to him, the young inventor began to believe that his chum was mistaken.

"Guess it was only the storm," he said, still pitching his voice low.

"Maybe," agreed Ned. "Yet at first I was sure the sound came from the house."

"It might at that, and still nobody need be in it," Tom suggested. "In an old, deserted place like this there are always doors to swing, windows to rattle, and shutters to slam."

"I suppose so," agreed Ned. "Well, shall we go in and have a look around?"

"I don't know that it will do us any good or that we can learn anything by going in this old mansion," was Tom's comment. "Yet as long as we're here we might as well go in. If we're going to stay here all night——"

"Stay here all night!" interrupted Ned, in surprise.

"I don't mean in there," and Tom pointed to the dark and silent mansion, "but in our own House. It we're going to camp out here it's just as well to know the character of our neighbor."

"Sure," assented Ned. "Well, come on in and let's get it over with. Then we'll eat. I'm hungry!"

"So am I. Got your flashlight?" and Tom produced one of these handy little portable torches.

"Never go without it when I'm traveling

with you," chuckled Ned. "You always end up in some queer situation or other." This was true, as Tom knew from past experience, so he did not comment on it.

A look behind the young men showed them that the auto was where they had left it, the power shut off, the headlights glowing, and also some lights turned on showing the cozy interior.

"I'll sure be glad to get back in it," murmured Tom.

"So will I," echoed his chum.

The deserted mansion the two had discovered half way up Dismal Mountain was like many other tenantless houses in lonesome country districts, only this was rather larger and better.

With the departing of the owner the place had been left to the mercy of the elements and the whims of those who were more or less vandals who took delight in needlessly breaking doors, windows and shutters. Consequently there was no difficulty in getting into the place. The front door gaped wide and, after flashing their lights into and around a spacious entrance hall, Tom and Ned stepped inside.

"I guess this a hang-out for tramps now and then," remarked Tom, as the two advanced down the hallway.

"Shouldn't wonder," agreed Ned. "They've got plenty of rooms at their disposal, anyhow,"

he added as his light showed many apartments as they continued on their way. Aside from broken boxes and barrels, with here and there a litter of straw or leaves, there was no furniture in the rooms.

Dismal and eerie to the extreme was the deserted house. Paper peeling from the damp walls hung in strips like festoons of Spanish moss. In places the plaster had fallen, leaving gaping holes that were like sightless eyes staring at the intruders.

They went through the first floor, flashing their lights into nooks and corners but discovering nothing. There were some signs of the place having recently harbored such tenants as tramps. In one room a fire appeared to have been burning not long since on an open hearth and some empty tin cans scattered about seemed to give evidence that hoboes had cooked a meal here some time.

"Shall we go upstairs?" asked Ned, when their inspection of the first floor was finished.

"Might as well," decided Tom. "Then we'll know there isn't anything here to annoy us after we get back to the House."

The front stairway was a large and imposing one, sweeping up to a balcony where there was space enough for a fairly large room. From here one could look down into the lower front

hall. As Ned followed Tom to this balcony he saw the young inventor turn and gaze intently at what appeared to be a panel in the back wall of the landing. Tom's start was so obvious that Ned asked:

"What's the matter?"

"I thought—I wasn't sure—but I thought I saw one of those oak panels slide as I came up the stairs," answered Tom.

"You thought you saw a panel slide!" exclaimed Ned. "Say, this is like a moving picture mystery."

"Maybe it was only the shadow of your flashlight," went on Tom.

He advanced to the rear wall and tapped on it. The lower part was made up of what had once been beautifully carved, quartered oak panels. But as far as the two adventurers could discover, all of them were in place and none seemed movable.

"It must have been a shadow," said Ned.

"I guess so," agreed his chum.

The rooms upstairs, like those below, were bare and deserted, devoid of furniture, but with the same festoons of drooping wall paper. In some of the chambers there were piles of old bags and leaves in some corners showing plainly that tramps had been sleeping there.

"It was probably these hoboes, who made this

place a hang-out, that gave rise to the stories about ghosts and bootleggers on Dismal Mountain," commented Ned, and Tom agreed that this might be so.

The number and arrangement of the upper rooms confirmed the ideas of the young men that this mansion had once been the home of persons who lived in luxury and moved in high society. There were a number of bedchambers, each with a private bath. But the latter rooms were in worse ruin than any other part of the house, for the fixtures had been torn out, probably by those who wanted the lead and brass piping to sell to junkmen. Some of the porcelain bath tubs had been wantonly cracked and broken.

It was when Tom, preceding Ned, walked out of one of the bedrooms into the main hall that the young inventor gave another perceptible start and uttered a low exclamation.

"What's the matter now?" asked Ned, with half a laugh. "See another moving panel?"

"No, but, somehow, Ned, I feel as if we were being spied upon! Don't you?"

"Spied upon! What do you mean?"

"Well, when I came out of that room," and Tom pointed back to it, "I had a distinct feeling that eyes were following me. Didn't you ever have such a feeling?"

"Yes; but not now. I think you're just overworked and nervous. You did most of the driving, and with that and the storm and getting bogged, it's no wonder you're seeing things."

"Well, maybe that's it," agreed Tom, but his heart did not appear to be in what he was saying. "I am tired. I'll be glad when we have had something to eat and can turn in for a good night's sleep."

"Boy, you let loose an earful that time!" chuckled Ned.

He saw that Tom was flashing his light back into the room they had just quitted and he followed his chum's example. But nothing was seen save the same dismal ruin that confronted them on every side.

Going downstairs behind Tom, when Ned reached the landing where the young inventor had said he thought he saw a panel move, he was suddenly conscious of the same feeling that Tom had mentioned—that of unseen eyes staring at him.

"But it's all bunk!" said Ned to himself. "It's just nerves. I'm not going to speak of it. Tom has enough to worry about now."

However, he cast a quick look over his shoulder and even flashed his torch on the oak

paneling, a move which caused Tom to ask:

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing," answered Ned, prevaricating just a little. But he felt he had a right to, since, as he reasoned, Tom Swift had been under a strain for several days getting the House on Wheels in shape for this test trip. There was no sense in adding to his worries, especially as it was such an intangible something that Ned had felt.

Yet he could not get over the sensation that he, too, as Tom had been, was being watched by sinister eyes somewhere within that deserted mansion. Eyes that were evil, that looked evil, and that hoped evil.

"Might have been bats," thought Ned. "Always have been bats in an old house. That's what it was—bats. I'll be getting them in my belfry if I don't get something to eat soon," he thought, with a noiseless chuckle.

Their footsteps echoed and re-echoed through the dark and eerie mansion, but nothing happened, save now and then a distant and ghostly hammering or clattering sound that plainly came from rattling windows, banging doors, and swinging shutters.

"Well," remarked Tom, with a sigh of relief, "we've proved that there's nobody around

here to annoy us. Now for a good night's rest."

He stepped out of the front door, closely followed by Ned. The rain was coming down hard and the wind had once more risen to the proportions of half a gale. For a moment Tom and Ned stood on the big front porch. Then Ned remarked:

"We must have got turned around and come out the back way."

"Why so?" asked Tom.

"Because we left the House right where we could see it from the front steps, and it isn't in sight now. We must have got turned around and come out at the back instead of the front."

"This is the front all right," said Tom in a queer voice. "It's where we went in, but the House on Wheels is gone!"

"Gone!" cried Ned. "It can't be!"

"Look for yourself," asserted his chum. "You know where it was. In plain sight with lights going, as we saw just before we went inside. Now it's gone!"

There was no doubt of it. The House on Wheels had vanished!

CHAPTER XV

ON THE TRAIL

THEIR hearts oppressed with a sense of foreboding which they could not fathom, Tom Swift and Ned Newton hurried down the broad front steps of the old mansion, out into the wind and rain, and hurried toward the clearing where they had left the warm, lighted, and cozy House on Wheels. For a moment they hoped that perhaps the lighting system had failed and that they could not see the big auto because it was shrouded in darkness.

But as they lighted their way by means of their pocket flashlights and reached the spot, near two large, distinctive trees where they had halted the big auto, there was no question about it. Their car had been taken away! It could not have rolled downhill, for it had been stopped on a level spot, and Tom had taken pains to set the brakes.

"Some one came and got it!" exclaimed Tom,

when it was certain that the machine had vanished.

"Who was it?" came from Ned.

"Hard to say. But I guess we weren't wrong, Ned, in suspecting that we were being spied upon by unseen eyes in that old house."

"I'm forced to believe that."

"While some watched us inside, to make sure we wouldn't come out and interrupt the theft, others stole the House," declared Tom.

"Looks so," commented Ned. "Gee, but this is tough luck! What are we going to do now?"

"We've got to hit the trail, of course, and see if we can't get it back," was Tom Swift's prompt answer.

Though they were hungry and tired, the two young men did not hesitate. In fact, they could not. Much depended on prompt action, for the House on Wheels could not long have been taken away. Luckily Tom and Ned had on rubber boots and rain coats, and their little electric flashlights enabled them to see the trail. Without them they would have been at a great disadvantage.

But with these gleams, flashing occasionally so as not to wear out the batteries too fast, the two first made sure where the big auto had stood and then began to trail it.

"They first swung around in a half circle and then went off this way," said Tom, pointing to the peculiar marks in the mud left by the tires of the House on Wheels. They were tires especially made for heavy duty and marked with ridges designed to prevent skidding, so the trail was easily followed, particularly as the wet ground took a deep impression.

"It ought to be a cinch to trace her," remarked Ned, as the two young men hurried on, their weariness and hunger forgotten in the excitement of the chase.

"Yes, for a way, anyhow," agreed Tom. "But we may not always have soft dirt roads like this to retain the marks. Though I don't believe there are any concrete stretches in this neighborhood," and he motioned toward Dismal Mountain, up the trail of which the House on Wheels clearly had been driven.

"The ground will be soft for a couple of days after this rain, and we can keep on following," suggested Ned.

"They may get too far ahead of us to leave us a Chinaman's chance," said Tom, with a sigh. "Remember, we're walking, and if the House only crawled it could do ten miles to our one. Besides, they may run her down off this mountain and onto a hard road, and then the tire marks won't be one, two, six!"

On they splashed in the rain and darkness. The road taken by the House on Wheels, as evidenced by the tire marks, led up the mountain and the deserted house, with its gloom, its secrets and its spying eyes, was soon left in the rear of the young men who pressed on, now and then flashing their torches to make sure they were still on the right trail.

"Hark!" exclaimed Tom suddenly, when they had been thus going for several minutes.

"What is it?" asked Ned, coming to a halt.

"Let's listen and try to hear the motor," suggested the young inventor. "I have an idea those fellows, whoever they are, won't push the machine too hard. They may run her only a little way and then lay over for the night."

Accordingly, the two stood there with the rain dripping on them, listening. But the only sounds that came to their ears were those of the storm—the wind and rain, the clattering of tree branches, and the swish of wet leaves.

"No use trying to hear anything," stated Ned, after a pause.

"No, I guess there isn't. We'll keep on."

Again the two plunged forward along the muddy road. They blessed their lucky stars that had given them the forethought to put on rubber boots and coats before venturing around and into the old house.

Tom, also, was glad he had equipped his car with those heavy and peculiarly marked tires, for they were very easy to follow, even under the adverse circumstances of rain and darkness.

In spite of the fact that the noise of the storm would seem to preclude their hearing any sound made by the car ahead of them, Tom and Ned stopped several more times and listened for any faint echo of a motor ahead of them. But they heard nothing.

"Maybe I'm wrong, Ned," said Tom, after a while, pausing at a sandy stretch in the road, where the wheel marks were very plain, "but doesn't it strike you that these tire impressions are fresher than they have been for some time back?"

"Fresher? Anybody would think we were trailing an elephant or some wild animal."

"Well, we are, in a way. But you see the rain has the effect of washing out the marks after a certain time. Now these marks here are sharp and fresh."

"Yes, I admit it," said Ned. "But what of it?"

"Well," and Tom's voice had a note of triumph in it, "to me this means that my House has passed here within a short time—minutes I should say—otherwise the hard rain would have washed down some of the tire ridges."

"Tom, you're right!" cried Ned. "She ought to be close now."

"That's what I think. Come on!"

Once more the two plunged forward. The tire marks continued to become ever fresher until the seekers reached a place where a small road branched off the main highway.

"They went up here!" cried Tom, indicating the trail that led up the branch road.

"Sure enough!" assented Ned, flashing his light on the marks.

Up the road the two fairly ran until, so quickly that it was startling, they came upon the big auto at a standstill in the middle of the highway. The House on Wheels was in darkness, but there it was.

"We've found her!" exulted Tom, but he had the caution to speak in low tones.

"Sure enough," agreed Ned and his voice was hardly more than a whisper. "But what's the game, I wonder?"

That remained to be seen.

CHAPTER XVI

TWO STRANGE MEN

THERE were two theories to account for the taking away of the House on Wheels. These at once occurred to Tom Swift and Ned Newton as they stood in the rain and darkness near the auto, hardly able to believe their good luck which had brought them to the machine within half an hour of the theft.

One explanation was that the legal authorities of the place—state police or local traffic officers—had come upon the parked House while Tom and Ned were in the deserted mansion. Seeing no one in the big auto, but observing that the lights were on, the authorities might have concluded that there had been an accident or that the car was abandoned and so had decided to drive it some place where it could be held pending an investigation.

Another and more plausible theory, was that ordinary thieves, happening upon the car, had decided to appropriate it for themselves. For

it was a car that any one might desire to possess.

As Tom and Ned stood behind the discovered auto, pondering over these matters, it was more and more evident to them that the car had been stolen and abandoned. But had it been abandoned for good, or were the thieves just temporarily away from it?

That last consideration must give them serious pause.

For perhaps a full minute the two stood there, the rain dripping off their hats and coats, while they considered. Meanwhile they were using their ears and eyes to the best possible advantage; their ears particularly. For soon after discovering the auto they had switched off their torches and now stood in gloom. There was no light either in the House on Wheels or at the headlamps, as Tom and Ned ascertained by a quick glance forward.

No sound came from the stranded auto. There was no noise of movement on the part of those who had taken the vehicle away and who might now be in ambush near it.

"Well," questioned Ned in a whisper, "what'll we do?"

"Let's circle the House and see if we can spot anybody," was Tom's answer, just breathed into his chum's ear.

The storm was making so much noise that

ordinary sounds on the part of the two would be covered, they thought. Still, they were not going to take any chances and they used the utmost caution in proceeding.

"Come on!" whispered Tom.

"I'm with you!" answered Ned.

Side by side they started around the left of the House, intending to make their way to the front and gain control of the machine. They were not half way to their objective when there was a noise up ahead—a crackling and trampling of the bushes and voices coming out of the darkness.

Tom reached out and caught the coat of Ned who was moving away from him.

"Hold on!" whispered the young inventor, pulling his chum toward him. "Let's see who these birds are before we bump into them."

It was good advice, as Ned admitted by following Tom into a little recess of the underbrush about midway of the auto. Pushing themselves back into the screen of shrubs, the two waited. They were not long left in doubt as to the character or intentions of the men whose voices came to them.

There were two men, as evidenced by the different tones. One said:

"Well, we got her all right!"

"You said it."

From the tones of the voices Tom and Ned judged one man to be big and the other small, and, without sight of them, the hidden ones so distinguished the two speakers mentally.

"It was easy," went on Big, to give him a temporary designation.

"Maybe it was too easy," suggested Small.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I mean those two lads won't give up their machine so easily. They may come to get it back."

"Let 'em!" chuckled Big. "We'll be ready for 'em."

"I'd feel better satisfied if we had kept on," said Small. "I don't see the sense in stopping here."

"That's what the boss told us to do if we were lucky enough to get the machine," said the other. "And we did."

"Well, if the boss told us to stay here, we've got to, I reckon," admitted Small. "But there's no use staying out in the wet. That's a pretty nifty little outfit this fellow Quick turned out, and I don't see why we can't take it easy in it and have some grub."

"There's no harm in that," agreed Big. "But the chap who got up this dingus is named Swift, not Quick."

"It's all the same," chuckled the other. "And

I can't get in out of the wet any too quick and have something to eat. What say?"

"I'll be with you in a little while."

"Why, where you going?" asked Small, and there seemed to be a note of suspicion in his voice.

There was a moment before the reply came and in that moment Tom and Ned made several rapid conclusions. There was no doubt now but what their car had been stolen. These were no state police or local traffic officers who had run the car away for its own safety. They were thieves and had evidently acted from a well-planned motive.

"They know you, Tom, or one of them does," whispered Ned.

"Seems so! By golly! I'd give a good deal to know just who is back of all this!" Tom's voice though low was tense and angry.

"Maybe we can find out," whispered Ned.

"Hush!" cautioned Tom, and at that moment Small spoke again, saying:

"Where you going? What's the game? Why don't you come in with me and help rustle some grub on that electric stove I saw."

"I can't come just now," was the answer.

"Getting cold feet?" demanded the other man sullenly. "Say, if you're trying to double cross me——"

"Don't be a fool!" snapped Big viciously. "It's all part of the game we're playing for the boss."

"Well, maybe it is. But I don't like you sneaking off this way leaving me all alone in case anything happens."

"I've got to go. I've got to go tell the boss."

"You have?"

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"A little way ahead, waiting. His orders were, if we got the car, to stop here and for me to come on alone and let him know."

"All right, then I reckon you got to do it. But where is the boss?"

"Near the entrance to the castle."

"Oh! Well, all right. Go ahead, but don't leave me alone any longer than you can help."

"Ho! Who's getting cold feet now?" jeered Big.

"Well, you never know what can happen," grumbled Small. "It's a nasty night. Those fellows may get help and trace us here. I'm not afraid of the two, but if they get a gang of police——"

"Forget it! They'll never find us. Besides, where could they get any police on a night like this to come to Dismal Mountain?"

"Well, maybe they couldn't. Anyhow, don't be any longer than you can help."

"I won't," promised Big. "Soon as I let the boss know we've pulled off the trick I'll come back. You can wait inside and be cooking your own grub. I'll eat when I come in."

"All right. Hop to it."

The sound of one man striding away in the darkness through the brush could be heard. The two had evidently gone on ahead after temporarily abandoning the House and had come back to hold their talk in front of the halted machine. Now one was going away and the other remaining.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Ned.

"Let me think a minute," suggested his chum. "Did you hear that remark about the castle?"

"Yes."

"Have you any idea what it means?"

"Yes, I heard something about it when I was looking up the history of Dismal Mountain before I had any idea we'd ever come here. The castle is an old stone building, built to represent its name. It was started by a rich man who had an idea he'd like to live somewhat after the English style. But either he died or his money gave out, for the castle was never quite finished. It's an old, rambling pile

of stone near the top of this mountain of mystery."

"Anybody live in it?"

"That I don't know. Probably it's deserted like the old house, but it may be the hang-out of some of the gangs infesting the mountain, and it's very evident that our car has fallen into the hands of one of these same gangs."

"Yes," agreed Tom. "But they won't have my machine long!"

"What are you going to do?"

"Get it back, Ned. There's only one man there now and we ought to be able to easily handle him."

"He's likely to be armed. They both are I should say, and there is no telling when Mr. Big may come back."

"I aim to do up Mr. Small before Mr. Big shows up," replied Tom grimly. "As for being armed, we've got our own automatics."

"That's so!" agreed Ned, who, for the moment, had forgotten that before getting out of the House on Wheels to go to the old house he and his chum had put the weapons in their pockets. "Well, lead on, Tom."

"We'll wait just a moment to see that Big doesn't change his mind and come back," suggested the young inventor.

But the echoes of the retreating footsteps of

the other echoed fainter and fainter above the sound of the storm and it was evident that he was going on to seek the "boss," whoever that personage might be.

Waiting another few seconds, Tom and Ned heard Small enter the House and a moment later there was a gleam of light within the auto. Tom drew a deep breath. He could not bear to have any hands but those of himself and his friends touch his latest pet machine. But it was now, temporarily at least, captured by an unknown enemy.

"Come on now!" whispered Tom fiercely to his chum, drawing his automatic and stepping out of their hiding place.

"I'm with you!" answered Ned, who had his own weapon in readiness.

CHAPTER XVII

THE CAPTIVE ESCAPES

INSTEAD of proceeding to the front of the House on Wheels, the opening by which the remaining man had entered, Tom Swift turned to the rear, somewhat to the surprise of his chum.

"You can't get in that way," suggested Ned. "The back steps are up."

"I know," whispered Tom. "But they can be let down from the outside if you know the trick. I arranged a duplicate control, for I didn't know when I might run my machine into a tree and have to get in and out the back door."

Ned knew that Tom was only joking with his reference to ramming his beloved new car into a tree. But it was true that there was an inconspicuous spring outside, on the rear of the machine. This, when operated, let the folding steps down out of their safety recess and enabled one to enter the rear of the House with-

out reference to what was going on in front.

"We'll give him a great surprise" whispered Tom.

Ned now understood what the proceeding was to be and he was close behind his chum as the latter approached the rear of the big car. Inside the lights were gleaming and the shadow of the intruder could be seen passing to and fro at the windows. Evidently he had no suspicion that the owner of the stolen machine was soon to take vengeance.

Pressing the switch of his flashlight for a brief instant, Tom located the control spring and as he pressed it the steps slowly slid down so he and Ned could mount them. The lowering of the steps also automatically unlocked the rear door.

The storm, after a brief cessation, was raging again, and the noise of this—rain on the leaves, drumming on the roof of the House on Wheels, and the howling of the wind—was enough to cover any slight noises Tom and Ned might make.

With Tom in the lead, the two young men entered the car. The intruder could be heard rummaging about up in front, evidently with the intention of appropriating to himself such portable property as he could before the return of his companion, with or without the "boss."

For the first time the young inventor and his chum now had a sight of the man whom they had designated "Small," because of his voice. His stature was in keeping with his tones. He was a short, squat individual, but looked powerful, and his face had an ugly look as he was observed moving about in the compartment near the front seat.

"Is that the rat-faced man you have been talking about, Ned?" Tom inquired.

"No, this fellow is a stranger to me."

"I never saw him until now, either, as far as I remember," said Tom. "But we're going to get better acquainted right away," he grimly added.

Looking to make sure his automatic was in readiness, an example followed by Ned, Tom stealthily advanced through the two back rooms of the house to the front one where the man was rummaging about.

Ned did not know just what Tom's plan of capture was, and perhaps the young inventor did not himself. But suddenly, as Tom observed the intruder pocket some toilet articles of silver, which, it developed later, Tom had placed in a dresser for the exclusive use of Mary Nestor, the young man's self control vanished.

With an angry exclamation Tom Swift fairly

leaped into the front compartment where the man stood and, leveling his automatic at the intruder, the command came:

"Stick 'em up and do it quick!"

If the fellow had any intention of reaching for his gun, and a momentary deflection of one hand toward the side pocket of his coat would seem to indicate that, he soon gave over the idea as Tom went on:

"No tricks now! Put 'em up, and quick, or I'll let you have it!"

Ordinarily Tom Swift was the soul of politeness. But the sight of the vandal taking the things designed for Mary was too much for his self control. He "saw red," he afterward told Ned.

The look of amazement and fear on the man's face would have been laughable had not the situation been so serious. There was but a moment of hesitation and then up went the hands.

"Take his gun away, Ned," ordered Tom, and this was soon done. That momentary motion of one hand toward the coat pocket had indicated as plainly as words could have done where the weapon was hidden. It was an automatic of expensive make, and Tom put it in his own pocket with a grin of satisfaction.

"Now we've got you, let's hear your story!"

ordered Tom, still covering the man with his pistol. "What are you doing here?"

"No-no-nothing," the fellow half stammered. "I just came here to get out of the rain. I saw this machine on the road, with nobody in it, so I crawled in. I didn't take anything——"

"What about these?" and Tom reached one hand into another pocket and took out the silver articles. "I suppose these grew here?"

"Oh, those! Well, I didn't think——"

"And I suppose you and the other man, who's gone to tell the boss, just thought my car was parked back there for you to run off with. Is that it?" went on Tom.

"Oh, so you——"

"Yes, I'm the owner and I know all about you and I've got you dead to rights!" snapped the young inventor. Part of his statement was true, at all events. Though he was far from knowing all about the man. Yet he decided to bluff some more.

"I know you!" proceeded Tom. "Hanson's your name——"

"You got me wrong there, chief," said the man, with an uneasy smile. "Gorro is my name."

"Gorro, then. I was coming to that!" snapped Tom, carrying out his bluff. "But

even if you aren't Hanson you're in with him and——"

"No, chief, honest, I don't know Hanson."

"Who was the fellow who went after the boss?" asked Tom. "You might as well come through clean, for I'll find out anyhow."

Whether the fellow saw through Tom's bluff or whether he was just naturally stubborn did not at once develop. At any rate, a cunning and ugly light came into the prisoner's eyes and he said:

"Go ahead then. Find out the best way you can. I'll tell you nothing and, what's more——"

The fellow who had admitted his name was Gorro seemed about to shout and give an alarm, which might have been followed by a reckless attack on his part against Tom and Ned. But Tom guessed the man's intention and, stepping closer to him, pressed the automatic against his stomach and fairly growled out:

"If I hear so much as a peep from you I'll let you have it!"

Again Tom Swift was forcing himself to play a part. It is very doubtful, except to save the lives of himself and Ned, that he would have pulled the trigger. Yet Gorro undoubtedly thought that such might happen, for he shrank away and turned pale as he muttered:

"Don't shoot, chief! But I'm not going to give myself or my pals away."

"Well, don't try any monkey business then! Don't you make a sound. Now, Ned, you go through all his pockets while I keep him covered. We'll see who he is."

The man did not appear to fear that anything found in his pockets would disclose anything, for he held his hands high and made no objections as Ned went through his pockets.

After taking out the silver toilet articles there was nothing save a knife, some odds and ends, and a small sum of money. This last Tom told Ned to put back.

"Otherwise he might accuse us of having robbed him," said the young inventor.

There were no papers to disclose the fellow's identity or throw any light on who his companion or the mysterious "boss" was. And Gorro might as well be the captive's name as any other.

"Sit down!" said Tom, giving the fellow a sudden push to a folding seat on one wall. "I want to talk to you."

The action took the man by surprise, and Tom counted on this and also on the fact that a person standing naturally dominates the one sitting down. Police chiefs have found this out in questioning criminals.

But if Tom Swift thought to intimidate this man he was mistaken. Though Tom and Ned took turns firing questions at him, under the threat of the revolver, all Gorro would say was that he had seen the stalled car there and had entered it to get shelter from the storm.

"You're not telling the truth and you know it!" said Tom sternly. "You and that other man picked up this car near the old deserted house when we two were inside. You drove it here, branching off from the main road, and then you and your pal got out to find out where you were and how near to the place the boss said he'd meet you. Then you two came back, your pal went off to find the boss to arrange about going on to the castle and you came in here. You see I know all about you."

The man's eyes opened wide at this evidence on Tom's part that he had overheard some of the talk. Still he refused to answer any questions as to his own further identity or that of the man who had gone to speak to the "boss."

"No use asking me, I won't talk," snarled Gorro, and he relapsed into sullen silence out of which nothing seemed to stir him. Tom and Ned were a bit disappointed, but they were rejoiced to recover the House on Wheels and to have one captive as a result of their work.

"Though what we're going to do with him

is more than I know," confessed Tom to Ned in a whisper, as they withdrew to the far end of the compartment and eyed the hangdog prisoner.

"Tie him up and leave him at the nearest police station," suggested Ned.

"The trouble is there aren't any police stations around here on Dismal Mountain," answered Tom. "And I don't like to have him in here with us, even if he is roped."

"No, he might get loose while we're asleep and do no end of damage," agreed Ned. "Well, I suppose the only thing we can do is to read him the riot act and let him go."

"Yet I hate to do that," confessed Tom. "He'll only make more trouble for us as long as we're in this neighborhood."

"Then you aren't going to clear out once you get started again?" asked Ned.

"I am not! I'm going to solve the mystery of this mountain or know the reason why!" asserted Tom Swift.

During this talk the prisoner, for such he was though not held in bonds, seemed to be cocking his ears and listening to something that was going on outside. For a time Ned and Tom did not notice this, being too intent on their consultation as to what was best to do.

But all at once Tom Swift became aware that

Gorro, if that was his name, was listening to something more going on outside than merely the fall of the rain and the howling of the wind.

"Look at him, Ned," said Tom in a low voice, indicating, with his eyes, the prisoner. "What's he up to?"

Ned looked, but could form no guess. As a matter of fact, Gorro was still sullenly sitting in the seat to which Tom had pushed him. But there was a look in his eyes that boded no good.

"I'll give you one more chance!" said Tom suddenly, more for the sake of breaking the tenseness than of any hope that it would break down the fellow's resistance. "Will you tell?"

"No!" yelled Gorro. "And you won't be here much longer, either!"

With that he dived off the seat to the floor, where he wriggled along like some clumsy snake and a moment later before Tom or Ned could stop him or before Tom could fire, if he wanted to go to that length, the fellow was out of the front door and rushing away in the darkness.

At the same moment there was another noise outside and a shout as though some one had seen Gorro and had hailed him. Ned and Tom did not doubt that the other man had come back and was taken by surprise to see his pal thus

leap from the House on Wheels they had so daringly captured.

"There he goes!" yelled Ned, which was really a useless exclamation, as Tom could see very plainly what had happened. "After him!"

"No!" shouted the young inventor, catching hold of Ned, who would have followed the escaped prisoner. "Let him go! He's met his pal outside and the other man has a gun. Let him go. Besides, we'd never locate him in this downpour."

As he spoke it seemed as if the heavens had opened and let down a flood of water, so heavily was the rain now beating on the roof and sides of the House on Wheels.

CHAPTER XVIII

SHOTS FROM AMBUSH

STANDING near the seat where, but a moment before, Gorro had sat practically at their mercy, Tom Swift and Ned Newton looked at each other, a little dazed by the suddenness with which it had all happened. They had been so confident of their prisoner, and now he was gone and his secret with him. But the situation was not as easy as it appeared on the surface.

"Make everything snug!" exclaimed Tom, pulling himself together and getting ready for action. "Look sharp!"

"What's the idea?" Ned wanted to know. "Are you going after this fellow?"

"Indeed I'm not! But we're going to pull out of here as soon as we can. I think it isn't a very healthy place. First, though, we've got to make sure everything is all right, that the engine hasn't been damaged, and look to make

certain we haven't any more stowaways on board. Some one may be hiding here."

It did not take long to ascertain that Gorro had been alone in his short occupancy of the House on Wheels. None other of the gang was in the place. A test which Tom and Ned then applied to the motor showed that it was in good working order. The men had run the House a short distance, but, unless morning should disclose some damage to the outside of the vehicle, it seemed to be as it was when the two young men left it to examine the deserted mansion.

As they hurried to and fro, making ready for a continuation of the trip, Tom and Ned talked over what had occurred and speculated on what it all could mean.

"It sure is mysterious," declared Ned. "They seem to have been waiting there for you, Tom."

"Yet that couldn't be, for until I decided to come to Chesterport to see Mary, not even you knew I contemplated such a trip. As a matter of fact, I did not contemplate it until then."

"That's right."

"And we didn't mention Dismal Mountain to anybody that I know of."

"We told Mary we were coming here."

"Yes. But she isn't the kind of girl to

broadcast such news. She never talks of my plans."

"Her friend, Grace Winthrop, might have," suggested Ned.

"Nonsense! As if either of those girls would be in communication with Gorro and his gang!" scoffed Tom.

"Oh, I didn't mean it that way!" Ned made haste to say. "But they might have been talking our trip over between themselves while downtown in Chesterport, and some of this gang might have overheard them and decided it would be a good chance to get a fine new car easily."

"It's possible, but not very probable," answered Tom.

"Then there's that fellow," suggested Ned.

"What fellow?"

"Floyd Barton—the one who was showing Mary so much attention. She might have let the object of our trip slip out to Barton and he may have talked."

But Tom Swift shook his head.

"He's one of those rich chaps who don't care about anything but hanging around girls and having a good time," said the young inventor, and Ned surmised that there was litle love lost between Tom and Floyd Barton.

"Well, maybe we'll get at the bottom of this

some day," went on Ned. "But those fellows, whoever they were, must have known we were coming and been on the lookout for us."

"It seems so," admitted Tom. "And I wonder who the boss is! If we could put our hands on him we'd have the key to unlock the whole mystery. But, meanwhile, let's get going."

"Which way?" asked Ned. "Do you mean to say you're going to keep on in this storm?"

"I certainly am!" declared his chum. "The House was built for rough work, and this will be a good test. Besides, I have an idea that staying round here isn't going to be exactly healthy. There was another fellow with Gorro you know, and now that our late prisoner has gotten away and met him, the two, in conjunction with the unknown boss, may decide to make another attempt to capture our House."

"That's so," agreed Ned. "The quicker we get down off Dismal Mountain the better."

"Down!" exclaimed Tom in a surprised voice. "I'm going on up!"

"Up!"

"Up, yes, to the top."

"Whew!" whistled Ned.

"Why, what's wrong with that?" Tom wanted to know. "Isn't that what we planned

to do—cross Dismal Mountain and find out the truth of some of these weird stories?"

"Yes— But the danger?"

"There's more danger trying to turn around and go back down that steep slope on a dark night and in a pouring rain when the roads may be washed out than there is in going ahead," said Tom.

"I can't quite see that," and Ned shrugged his shoulders. "The roads up ahead may be even worse than those we came up, as far as washouts go."

"Well, it will be awkward turning around, anyhow," Tom decided. "There isn't any too much room to maneuver, and it will be safer to go ahead, I think."

"Then I'm with you!" declared Ned.

Switching on the most powerful headlights, Tom Swift looked ahead as well as he could up the dark and rain-swept road along which he was soon guiding his vehicle. Back of him Ned was beating up the eggs and slicing and chopping the ham to make an omelet. Already the delicious aroma of boiling coffee permeated the House.

"Grub'll be ready soon now!" called Ned, as he slipped the omelet into the frying pan.

"Good for you!" called back Tom from the driver's seat where he was watching the road.

It went on up the mountain in an easy slope and was a fairly good highway.

"Going to eat with one hand and drive with the other, or are you coming back and sit at the table?" asked Ned, when the meal was almost ready.

"Oh, I'll slow down and eat properly," Tom replied. "My coffee would slop all over me if I tried to drink it while going along here."

A little later Tom came to a wider place in the road. Here he pulled to the right and, putting on the brakes, but leaving the engine running, in case they had to get out in a hurry, Tom climbed back and joined his chum at the table.

"Not half bad, this, is it?" chuckled the young inventor, having tasted the omelet.

"It would be jolly if it didn't storm so," replied Ned, with a little shiver. "Listen to that rain, would you!"

It was dashing hard on the roof, sides, and windows of the House on Wheels.

"Can't get in, that's one consolation," Tom said. "And I never sleep better than when I hear rain on the roof."

"Do you intend to do any sleeping tonight?" Ned wanted to know, as he filled Tom's coffee cup a second time. "If you do,

I'd advise you to reduce your quantity of coffee."

"I don't reckon we'll get much sleep to-night," said Tom, and his air was a bit anxious. "I want to get well away from this place, and if we do that and keep a lookout the rest of the night, we won't have much time for enjoying our rest."

"No, I suppose not," agreed Ned. "Then coffee is the best thing you can take. It will keep you awake," and he gave himself a second helping.

Under other circumstances Tom and Ned would have made the occasion of the night meal in their traveling auto a jolly affair. But now there was too much to think of. So, when they had satisfied their appetites, Tom climbed back to the driver's compartment and started the car again, while Ned cleaned up in the kitchen.

"Did you hear that?" Tom called to his companion after a period of silence, broken only by the racket of the wind and rain.

"Yes," answered Ned. "Sounded like a shot. What was it?"

"Thunder. It's beginning to lighten again, and I think we're in for a worse storm than any we've had yet."

"Maybe it will be a clearing-up shower," suggested Ned.

"Hope so," commented Tom.

He drove on, the lightning flashes coming more vividly and oftener now. Ned came forward to sit beside his chum, and once, during the period of a vivid flash, both of them saw something that caused them to start and Ned to cry:

"Did you see that man with a gun?"

"I did!" answered Tom. "Just ahead!"

The lightning had revealed a sinister face peering out from behind a bush.

"Better slow up, hadn't you?" asked Ned, straining his eyes through the added darkness that followed the flash to get another glimpse of the armed man.

"No, I think we'd better hasten on," was Tom's opinion. "He may have been only a hunter who has lost his way."

"I hope he isn't hunting us," said Ned grimly.

There came another flash, but they had gone on past the place where the man's face had been observed, and no other foes were now revealed by the glare from the sky.

"There's one thing we ought to do," said Ned, after the House on Wheels had rumbled

on a little farther, the grade being steeper now.

"What is it?"

"Put out those lights back of us. They only show us up to those who may be watching."

"That's right," agreed the young inventor. "Go in and douse 'em!"

At the same time he reached forward and and cut the switch that controlled the illumination of his dashboard. This left the auto with but the bright headlamps glowing, and they kept any one who might be in front of the auto from seeing anything of the occupants of the driver's seat.

In the darkness Ned sat beside his chum. The House on Wheels was being driven on. Ned was about to ask Tom if he did not want to be relieved for a while when there came a sudden sharp crack from the bushes on the left of the road. At first Ned thought it was a preliminary to a burst of thunder. A moment later he knew it had been a rifle shot.

Then came several more reports, and one bullet, fired from ambush, shattered a window back of the two who had dared to try to solve the mystery of Dismal Mountain.

CHAPTER XIX

PRISONERS

"They're firing at us!" cried Ned Newton.

"Guess there isn't much doubt of that!" was Tom Swift's grim rejoinder. "Are you hit?"

"No. Are you?"

"Not yet, but we both may be if this thing keeps up."

That the bombardment was going to keep up was evident a moment later when above the noise of the storm there were other shots and a second window was shattered.

"Come on!" cried Tom, and with a quick motion he shut off all lights on the House on Wheels, leaving it in gloom.

"What are you going to do?" asked Ned.

"Get off this seat. We're in too exposed a position here. They're trying to pick us off!"

"It sure seems so!" agreed Ned.

"Follow me before the next lightning flash, or they'll see us," called Tom into Ned's ear.

The motor was shut off and the auto stopped.

The two slid down off the driver's seat and plunged into the thick, rain-drenched bushes on the right of the road.

"Got your automatic?" panted Tom, as he lunged forward.

"Sure!"

"Have it ready."

"What's the game?"

"We'll try to spot those fellows who were taking pot shots at us. Maybe we can do a little potting on our own account."

"That would suit me," growled Ned.

Their position was most uncomfortable. Neither had on any protection from the rain now, for they had taken off their rubber boots and coats on getting back into the House on Wheels. They had even dived off the seat without their caps. It was like emerging from the protection of a comfortable room into the rain-swept open.

"Good thing we ate when we did, or we'd never have gotten anything," remarked Tom, as he tramped along beside his chum.

"That's right. But where are we, anyhow?"

There was no means of knowing. They were somewhere on the slope of Dismal Mountain, out in the storm and darkness, seeking unknown enemies and being sought by them.

For a little while after leaping from the car

the two young men remained in the vicinity of it. They could see its bulk looming over the tops of the bushes by the glare of lightning flashes. Taking advantage of this intermittent light, they now began to circle about, trying to locate the man or men who had fired at them.

But the ambuscaders were playing safe, and did not show themselves. Tom and Ned skirted around, soon becoming soaked to the skin.

Finally Tom, who was in the lead, saw by one long, bright flash a sort of shelter where a group of big oaks grew amid some rocks.

"Let's put in over there," he proposed to Ned. "We'll be a little drier than out here."

"Dry!" chuckled Ned good-naturedly. "I'll be wet for a week after this soaking."

It was somewhat better in the shelter, and the two adventurers stood there a few minutes, listening to the storm. Their situation was anything but safe or comfortable. For it could not be said what moment they might be seen by their enemies and fired on again.

Presently, above the racket of the storm, they heard voices in conversation. Then, during a lull in the outburst of the elements, several persons could be heard tramping through the underbrush and approaching the rocks.

"They're coming!" whispered Ned, grasping his automatic.

"I think they haven't seen us," murmured Tom. "Keep still. Stoop down and maybe we can hear what they are saying."

The men—there appeared to be at least three—approached the outer circle of rocks in the center of which the two young men were hidden. Then, as the lull of the storm continued, Tom and Ned, to their surprise, heard the name Cunningham mentioned.

"Did you get that?" whispered Ned.

"Yes," Tom cautiously replied.

"Wonder if it's the same bird who wanted you to work for him."

"Might be. Keep quiet and listen."

What connection Cunningham's name had with the present activities was not made clear, nor was it spoken again. But one of the men, evidently more cautious than his companion, said:

"Don't be so free with names."

"Why not?" came the question.

"You never know who may be listening. Those fellows are somewhere in these woods."

"Yes, and they'll be here for some time if they depend on that shebang of theirs to take 'em out," went on another voice.

Tom and Ned stiffened on hearing this. It seemed to portend something desperate.

"Why, did Jerkin drive the car away?" one of the party wanted to know.

"That's what he did. Those fellows shut off the engine and put out the lights before they dived off that seat. But they didn't put the machinery out of business and Jerkin soon had it going again."

"I'll say they dived off!" chuckled a voice. "I guess we would 'a' done the same with bullets singing around our ears."

"Jerkin oughtn't to be so free with his gun," growled a voice that had not hitherto spoken. "He might have bumped one of them off, and there wasn't any need of that."

"The boss said to get that machine by hook or by crook," commented another. "And I suppose that's what Jerkin was thinking of. But Cun——"

"Go easy on names!" snarled some one. "I told you before!"

"It was going to be Cunningham," whispered Ned.

"Yes," agreed the young inventor. "But what would that Englishman be doing with this bunch of criminals?"

"There's no telling. We're getting an earful of more than rain, all right."

"Well, there's no use hunting around for those fellows any longer," said some one. "What with this storm and the dark, we'll never find 'em. I want to get under shelter and have something to eat. It smells as though they had cooked something in that queer auto of theirs."

"They did."

"Well, then I'm going to head for that and get some for myself. Where is Jerkin going to park it?"

"At the castle."

The mention of this name caused Tom to nudge his chum. It was the second time this place had been spoken of. Evidently it was a rendezvous for the gang.

"Well, then it's me for the castle," went on the hungry bandit. "Do you think Barton will be there?"

"Who, Floyd? Why he——"

"Say, will you fellows quit naming names?" snarled out the man who was, evidently, the most cautious of the party.

"Oh, there's nobody around to hear," said one of the two who had spoken the name of the young Chesterport man. "Come on, boys, let's go."

In the darkness, Tom and Ned sought to look one into the face of the other. What did

this mean—this mentioning not only of the name of Cunningham but that of Floyd Barton, the rich youth who was so attentive to Mary Nestor? Surely this mystery was deepening!

"Worse and more of it!" murmured Ned in Tom's ear, as they heard the unseen talkers preparing to move away.

"That's right," agreed the young inventor.

They waited a little while, the sound of the retreating footsteps growing fainter, and then, as the lull in the storm still held, Tom and Ned started out of their hiding place.

"We've got to head for the castle and get back our machine," stated Tom.

"Surest thing you know!" agreed Ned.

They were out from under the clump of trees and in the open when a brilliant flash of light came. In the glare, the two young men stood revealed as plain as by day. The lightning glare likewise showed to Tom and Ned three men not far away.

"There they are!" one of the trio yelled, pointing to the two.

"Get 'em!" shouted another.

"Come on!" cried Tom, and he leaped away, followed by his chum.

But they were in unknown territory and, blinded by the flash, could not see where they were going. They reached the edge of a little

gully and, before they could recover their balance, they went plunging down it, falling and rolling over and over.

"Come on! Come on!" yelled one of the three men, closely following the fugitives. "We've got 'em!"

A moment later they did have them. Taken at a disadvantage, pounced upon as they rolled, stunned, to the bottom of the gully, unable to use their weapons, Tom Swift and Ned Newton were quickly made prisoners by their enemies.

CHAPTER XX

IN THE CASTLE

Stunned and bruised by their unexpected fall into the gully and manhandled by their captors, Tom Swift and Ned Newton were in a bit of a daze as they were roughly pulled along. The men—there were at least four of them now, as two were on each side of the prisoners—walked their captives down the gulch in the middle of which ran a stream of water, swollen by the heavy rain.

One of the four bandits—Tom and Ned mentally called them this—had a flashlight which he used to pick out the path when the gleams of lightning failed, as they did every so often.

"Well, we got 'em both!" chuckled one of the men.

"And without firing a shot!" added another. "It was easy!"

"A slick bit of work," put in a third gruff voice. If——"

"No names now!" warned the fourth bandit.

By this time, their spent breath having come back and the cool rain on their heads having revived them, Tom and Ned were able to realize their desperate plight, and that it was desperate they had little reason to doubt.

Each of them was in the firm grasp of two evil men who, it was evident, would not hesitate to shoot if need be. But Tom Swift was not one to endure mistreatment silently. As he walked along he turned to one of his captors and demanded:

"What does this mean? Who are you, anyhow, and by what right are you taking us away?"

"Keep your shirt on, buddy," responded the man in what, doubtless, he meant to be a friendly and conciliatory tone. "You'll soon find out where you're going."

"And why!" added another, with a chuckle.

"Look here!" burst out Ned. "Maybe you don't know who we are!"

"Oh, we know all right, buddy," said the man who had first spoken to Tom. "It's because you are who you are that we got you."

"Orders from headquarters," said one who had not yet spoken.

"Shut up!" some one snarled at him.

The storm, after that outburst in which so

many things had happened, now appeared to be subsiding. The thunder was not so loud nor the lightning so glaring and frequent. The rain, too, had slackened.

"We have a right to know where you are taking us!" fiercely exclaimed Tom. "If you don't tell us you'll have a fight right here and now!"

He was prepared to try a sudden pull away from the men that held him, knowing it would be but a desperate chance, though willing to take it. But the man on his right warned him:

"Don't try any rough stuff, buddy. We'll treat you decent as far as we can, but we got orders to bring you in and we're going to do it. If you come along peaceable you won't be hurt."

"Then tell me where we are being taken!" demanded Tom.

"To the castle, if that means anything to you," replied the man who had warned against violence.

They were soon led out of the gully and found themselves on a road, bordered on each side with trees and bushes. It was evidently the main highway leading up Dismal Mountain—the same road on which they had been traveling in the House on Wheels. But what part of it they were on, they did not know.

"It ought to be somewhere around here," muttered one of the men, looking up and down the road.

"There it is—down by the bend," said another.

Tom and Ned had a glimpse of a dark shape looming over the tops of bushes and, for a moment, hoped it was their own car they had been forced to flee from. But when they got up to it they saw it was an ordinary auto.

"Get in!" ordered one of the men, and Tom and his chum, feeling this was no time to fight, did as they were told. The auto, a big touring car, held the two prisoners and two guards in the tonneau. The other two guards mounted to the front seat and they were soon traveling on in the darkness. The storm was now almost over, though the trees and bushes still dripped water. What the hour was the two prisoners could only guess, but it must have been long past midnight.

On up the dark and muddy road the big touring car was guided. It was so gloomy that, aside from the fact that there were trees and bushes on each side of the highway, Tom and Ned could see nothing.

"How you feeling, Tom?" asked Ned, easing himself in the seat.

"Pretty rotten!"

"So do I! But I'm glad we had that ham omelet."

"So am I!" laughed the young inventor. "But I'd like some dry clothes," he added.

"Same here."

Their captors did not seem to object to their talk, for there was no command to be silent. Nor, it was evident, did they fear any alarm being given or pursuit undertaken, since no precautions were taken. Tom and Ned guessed that the rascals knew they were pretty safe from disturbance while on Dismal Mountain.

How far they were driven, the two prisoners did not know. But about half an hour after they had gotten into the auto it began to slow up and the reason was evident. They had come to where a private drive led off from the main highway. It was a drive leading between two great stone posts which, in their day, must have suported immense iron gates. But the gates had long since rusted away or been carried away.

"Is this the entrance to the castle?" asked Tom of the man who had called him "buddy" several times, though perhaps more out of habit than affection.

"This is the shack," was the answer. "You'll get out in a few minutes."

The drive of the old mansion, which had

come to be called a "castle," was long and winding. But at length it came to an end in a big arc and at the upper curve stood the old pile of masonry which had started out to be a wonderful home, only it fell by the wayside.

No sooner had the car come to a stop on the drive, which was overgrown with weeds, than a door, in what was evidently an entrance hall, opened. A man, whom neither Ned nor Tom recognized, stood framed in the light.

"Did you get 'em?" asked this man.

"Sure thing!" answered "Buddy," as Tom and Ned designated the more friendly of their guards. "Is their machine here?"

"Rolled in just before you pulled up. Guess it isn't so easy to drive," remarked the man in the doorway.

"I hope they haven't damaged my House," murmured Tom, and Ned joined him in this wish.

However, just then there was no way of knowing what had happened to the big car. It was not in sight. In one or two lower windows of the old half ruined castle lights showed. All the upper windows were in darkness.

"Get down, you two!" gruffly ordered one of the guards.

Tom and Ned, stiff from the wetting they

had undergone and sore and bruised from their fall, alighted.

"Go on in," was the next command, and they thought it best to obey. A night's rest, some more food, and a chance to consider their situation was needed before they could make a break for liberty.

The two captives found themselves in what had once been a stately reception hall, but which was now in almost the same state of ruin and decay as was the old mansion where the young men had first lost their House on Wheels. However, they had little chance for observation, as they were fairly rushed out through a rear door, along a dimly lighted passage, and thrust into a dark room. The door was pulled shut and locked after them.

"Look here!" cried Tom angrily. "This is a rotten way to treat even a dog, and we haven't done anything to you fellows! We want something hot to drink and some dry clothes."

"Keep your shirt on, buddy," advised the man on the other side of the door. "You'll be treated decent—anyhow for a while. I'll see you get some dry things in a short time."

He was as good as his word, coming back in about fifteen minutes with a pile of old but dry and serviceable garments. At the same time he brought a tray of sandwiches and a pot

of hot tea. This last was most refreshing, and Tom and Ned ate and drank gratefully, once they had taken off their wet clothes and put on the dry ones.

By the light of a lantern their guard carried they saw that they were prisoners in a fairly large stone room containing one window with iron bars across it. Upon what this window looked they had no means of guessing in the darkness outside it.

"Where are we going to sleep?" asked Ned of the man who brought the food and clothes.

"What's the matter with those bunks?" the man asked, with a chuckle.

He held his lantern in a dark corner and there, where the prisoners had not before noticed them, were two cots with pillows and blankets on them. "Turn in there," was the suggestion. "They're as comfortable as those in that traveling house of yours, I reckon."

"Where is my House?" demanded Tom angrily.

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies!" replied the man, though not unkindly. "Better take it easy now."

With their bodily needs taken care of, Tom and Ned were free to wonder and speculate on what had happened, what it all meant and what the future held.

"But it's all pretty much guess work," said Ned, when they were talking it over.

"That's right," agreed Tom. "However, let's get some rest."

The bunks were comfortable, and in spite of their worry and anxiety they soon fell asleep.

The sun was shining in their barred window when they awoke. They had no sooner opened their eyes than the door was unlocked and a strange man came in with a tray of breakfast. The coffee smelled most appetizing.

During the night Tom had had an idea. He determined to try to find out something he much wanted to know. So, when the guard had set the tray down and was going out, Tom suddenly shot at him:

"Tell Basil Cunningham I want to see him at once!"

"Wha—what's that?" stammered the guard, obviously taken by surprise.

"I said tell Basil Cunningham I want to see him at once!" snapped out Tom.

The man appeared positively terror-stricken and hurried out of the stone room.

CHAPTER XXI

PLOTS AND PLANS

More than anything else on Tom Swift's part, it had been a bluff to name Cunningham and say he wanted to see him. Still, since the mention of the Englishman's name and that of Floyd Barton, both Tom and his chum had felt certain that the two were in some way mixed up in the queer doings on Dismal Mountain. But Tom had no notion that the mere mention of the Englishman's name would so startle the guard.

"Did you see that, Ned?" asked Tom, nodding toward the man who had left so hurriedly.

"I sure did. What does it mean?"

"To my mind it means that Cunningham is a worse rascal than I thought him, that he is one of the ringleaders of this gang, but that they are surprised we have guessed it."

"Looks so. But what are you going to do next?"

"Eat," was Tom's laconic answer, and he

moved toward the breakfast tray which, to do their captors justice, was bountifully laden and included a pot of steaming coffee.

Tom and Ned felt distinctly better after the meal, and they almost laughed at each other, for they presented a queer appearance in their borrowed clothes.

"But we'll have to wear them for some time," Ned remarked. "Our own were so thoroughly soaked it will take a couple of days to dry them out."

"Guess so," commented Tom. "Well, I've been worse off. Did you save your flashlight?"

"Yes," and Ned produced it, having slipped it, with some other possessions, from the pockets of his wet garments when the change was made the night before. "They got my gun, though."

"And mine," added Tom. "We'll have to sing small for a time, even if we manage to escape."

"Are you going to try that?"

"I surely am! But not right away. First I want to see what's going on around this castle."

They had ample time that day, though not much opportunity, for observation, since they were not released from the stone room. They had some relaxation, however, for there was a bathroom connected with it and they could wash

and be comfortable. The man who came to remove the breakfast tray was not the same one who had brought it in, but Tom determined to experiment on him. Accordingly the young inventor snapped out:

"When is Mr. Basil Cunningham coming to see me?"

The guard showed no alarm or even interest, merely grunting and remarking:

"You'll have to ask somebody else. That isn't in my department."

"Gosh!" commented Ned, when the fellow had gone. "You'd think this was a regular business!"

"I'm beginning to believe it is," was Tom's comment.

"What, a business place?" asked Ned, in surprise.

"Yes. Cunningham is a business man, you know, though I don't like his style. He's clever and I think he has surrounded himself with a bunch of crooks like himself and is carrying on a regular business in this old castle."

"What sort of business?"

"Come here and take a look," was Tom's reply.

They could look out of the barred window into a courtyard. In it, coming and going, were a number of men and auto trucks. The trucks

brought in rather large and heavy boxes. Some of these boxes were taken on hand trucks into various rooms of the old castle.

"That's been going on all morning," said Tom. "Once, when you were in the bathroom washing, I looked out of the grating in the door and I saw some men passing along the corridor carrying things that must have come out of the boxes."

"What sort of things?" Ned wanted to know.

As if to save Tom the need of answering, one of the boxes being unloaded from a truck suddenly slipped, fell, and broke open. Out of it tumbled what Ned recognized as high class scientific instruments, optical goods, binoculars, telescopes and the like.

"That's the stuff they're bringing into this castle," said Tom.

"My word! What for?" asked Ned.

"To doctor it up and dispose of it, I believe," Tom replied.

"But where do they get it? They don't manufacture those things here, do they?"

"Not yet. But I think they plan to," said the young inventor. "It was machinery for turning out such goods that Cunningham wanted me to make for him. But I saw his object—he wants to infringe on foreign patents. This stuff costs money, with the duty

and royalty that has to be paid, and if Cunningham could bootleg it, so to speak, he'd get rich."

"But he seems to be making it," and Ned pointed to where men were hurriedly gathering up the scattered telescopes and other instruments.

"No, he didn't make that! He stole it!" exclaimed Tom.

"Stole it?"

"Either he or some of his gang," was Tom's answer. "You know some of those clippings you gave me about Dismal Mountain said that freight and through express trains were held up and several cases of high grade electrical, scientific and optical goods were taken."

"I remember," assented Ned. "I thought at the time that it was pretty queer stuff for train bandits to take."

"Well, that's some of the stuff, I believe," went on Tom. "Cunningham is evidently an expert in this line of goods and he knows how to handle and dispose of them better than any other stuff that might be stolen. I think he wanted me to make machinery to turn out tools like these so he could say, if he were caught, that this old castle was his manufacturing plant. But his greatest source of goods would be from robbing trains."

"It doesn't seem possible!" murmured Ned.

"I know it. But there are the facts," said Tom, and his chum could but agree with him.

For two days Tom and Ned were kept close prisoners in the old stone room. During this time they discussed many plans and plots for escaping. None seemed to fit in, however, or else the time was not yet ripe, so they remained in captivity.

Meanwhile, the activity on the part of men bringing in cases of goods and carrying them along the corridor and past the room where Tom and Ned were locked kept up night and day. Except for small quantities of what seemed to be bolts of silk, all the things were optical goods or machines used by scientists—stuff worth a great deal of money. There was a hum and buzz of work all through the old castle, but except for men who came to bring them food, Tom and Ned had no contact with any of their captors.

Then, one night, the same guard who had shown perturbation when Tom first mentioned Cunningham, again brought in the tray of food. It needed but a glance to show that he had been drinking, and Tom, with a whisper to Ned, decided the man's befuddled state would afford them a good opportunity to do some more bluffing.

So, having inspected the tray, as if to look and see that it contained all he wanted, Tom stepped toward the man and in stern tones exclaimed:

"Did you give my message to Basil Cunningham?"

Instead of being alarmed as he had been before, the man leered in his drunken manner and thickly said:

"Sure I did!"

"Oh, did you?" Tom was rather taken aback by this reply.

"I sure did, and he's coming to see you soon."

This was more and different news, and Tom and his chum did not know how to take it. But Tom had another card he wanted to play.

Stepping toward the fellow the young inventor took him by one shoulder and, giving him a shake, exclaimed sternly:

"Never mind about Cunningham! Send Floyd Barton to me!"

Tom had determined to try the effect of this name.

To his surprise, it did not upset the man in the least. He leered at Tom and Ned with drunken gravity and mumbled:

"Barton's lucky—thash wha' he is! Lucky —hic—dog!"

"Lucky! What do you mean?" snapped out Tom.

"Mean he's goin' to marry a fine girl—thash wha' he ish! Lucky dog, Barton— Lucky—hic—dog!"

"Who's the girl?" asked Ned, more for the sake of giving his chum a chance to think up his next verbal attack than for any desire for information. "Do you know her?"

"No, I don't know her. But I know her name. Name's Mary—thash wha' it is. Mary—Mary—hic!"

Even yet the two were not suspicious, and Ned still joked.

"Mary Hick! That's a queer name," he chuckled.

"Not Mary Hick—no!" mumbled the half-drunken guard. "Not Mary Hick—Mary Nestor. Thash who Barton's goin' marry—Mary Nestor—fine girl—Mary—hic!"

"What's that?" cried Tom Swift, hardly able to believe his ears. "You dirty scoundrel, don't you mention her name again! What do you mean bringing her into this conversation? What has she to do with that sap, Floyd Barton?"

"He's sap aw right—sure!" agreed the drunken fellow. "But he's got money. Goin'

to marry fine girl—Mary—hic—no, not Mary Hick—thash wrong—Mary Nestor!"

Tom could restrain himself no longer. He stepped back, raised his fist and was going to let it drive full into the face of the guard when a sudden interruption came.

A man with a black handkerchief over the lower part of his face had entered the stone room, and, as Tom was about to fell the insulting guard, stepped between the two.

"You rotten beast!" Tom hissed.

He was suddenly pulled back by the masked man and swung to one side. But Tom's blood was up. Nothing could stop him now.

"Out of my way, you!" he yelled at the man who had hold of him. "Who are you, anyhow? None of your masked tricks with me! Off with that!"

Before the man who had stepped between Tom and the guard could put up his hands to prevent it, Tom had torn off the black handkerchief.

There, with a startled frown on his beefy red face, stood—Basil Cunningham!

CHAPTER XXII

THE ESCAPE

"CUNNINGHAM!" gasped Tom Swift, taken aback as much by the boldness of the rascal in coming into his presence as by the force the Englishman had used in swinging him aside. "You—Cunningham!"

"Yes!" hissed the crook, but he appeared agitated because of having had his mask torn off. "You made a wrong move that time, Swift!"

"Wrong move! What do you mean?"

"I mean I came in here only to save this drunken fool from a beating he well deserves. That has nothing to do with it. If you had kept your hand to yourself and left my mask alone I would not have minded so much. But, now that you have found me out, it will go hard with you—both of you!" and he pointed an accusing finger at Ned.

"I'm not afraid of you!" blustered the financial manager. "Come on, Tom!" he yelled.

"It's even now! And the other man's fuddled. We can handle Cunningham!"

At that moment another guard, attracted by the loud talking, entered the stone room, and as he was armed with a rifle the odds were too great to risk a fight.

"Better not try anything!" snarled Cunningham, putting in his pocket the black handkerchief Tom had pulled from his face. "Yes, Swift, you made a wrong move! We might have let you go, but, now that you made me show myself, it is impossible!"

"So you're going to keep us here?" inquired Tom.

"Yes!"

"It can't be for very long," said the young inventor. "We'll be missed. My House on Wheels will be traced. It was known we were coming to Dismal Mountain and searching parties will soon be on our trail."

"They won't find you!" snapped Cunningham. "You've made your own bed and now you can sleep in it. Take 'em out!" he ordered another guard who had joined the one with the rifle. "As for you—drunken fool that you are—clear out!" and his eyes blazed as he kicked the man who had blurted out the news of the approaching marriage of Floyd Barton and Mary Nestor. "Take 'em out!"

"Where, Boss?" asked one of the sober guards.

"To the dungeon, of course! Where else?"

Tom and Ned did not think it wise to put up a fight for, so they feared, Cunningham, in his rage, might order them shot. So they accompanied their captors along the corridor and down a flight of steps to what was evidently the cellar of the castle. A little later they were shut in another stone room, but smaller and much less desirable than their former prison. They were, indeed, in a dungeon.

"Now maybe you'll wish you hadn't been so fresh!" sneered one of the guards as he departed, locking the door.

Left to themselves, Ned and Tom looked at each other with somewhat woebegone and puzzled faces. Their dungeon was dimly lighted and was damp and depressing. It was almost like a prison cell.

"Well, I'm not going to stay here long!" declared Tom determinedly.

"What are you going to do?" asked Ned.

"Get out the first chance I see. This is sure rotten!"

"It will be if they don't feed us," agreed his chum. But they did not have to worry long on that score, for presently a man they had not seen before appeared with a tray of as good

food as had before been served to them. They were hungry and ate heartily. Then they were left alone and talked matters over.

"What do you think of that fellow's talk about Mary?" asked Tom. "Think there was any basis for it?"

"That drunk seemed to know what he was talking about. But you know Mary better than I do," answered Ned. "However, I don't believe Mary would ever consent to marry this Barton."

"Don't you?" cried Tom, and Ned saw that he caught at this straw.

"No, I don't. I believe, for reasons of his own, Barton has been telling that story and he's circulated it among these men, hoping it would reach you and break down your nerve!"

"It shan't!" cried Tom.

"No! Don't let it!" urged Ned. "It's a dirty, rotten game, Tom. They're trying to get your nerve!"

"That's it—a game!" cried Tom Swift, with new energy. "Well, they'll find that two can play at it! I'm out for revenge now, and when I meet Barton——"

"I hope I'll be there to see the fight!" chuckled Ned.

However, if Tom and Ned hoped for any immediate change in their captivity, they were

disappointed. For three days they remained in close confinement, and when meals were brought there were always two guards, one with a gun and the other with a tray, so there was no chance for a surprise attack.

Not giving up easily, though, Tom and Ned tried to escape from the small stone room at night. They took a fork and spoon from one of their trays, and with these simple implements tried to loosen some of the window bars.

At first they thought they were going to succeed, for they dug out some mortar. But it was only to find under the mortar that the bars were set in lead upon which their tools made no impression. So they had to give that up.

They were below the level of the ground, there being a little dug-out area upon which the only window in their cell opened. So they could see nothing of what went on in the courtyard on which they judged their prison room faced, for they could hear trucks coming and going and the murmur of many voices.

"Well, if we can't leave by the window we must try the door," said Tom, when they had been locked up a week. They still had the spoon and fork and hoped to be able to pick the lock. But a few trials convinced them that it was too strong.

Then, unexpectedly, their chance came. The

same guard, again drunk, who had blurted out the gossip concerning Mary and Barton came in with a tray of food for their supper, and in a flash Tom and Ned saw that he was alone.

For once the cunning of their captors had slipped!

"We'll get him this time, Ned!" whispered Tom, and his chum understood.

Smiling with drunken vacuity, the guard had unlocked the door. The tray was heavy and he had had to set it down on a stool outside to do this and use both hands in carrying it into the cell.

"Now!" cried Tom suddenly, and he and Ned threw themselves on the unsuspecting fellow. Before he could utter a cry Tom clapped his hand over the guard's mouth and while he got a knee into the small of his back, Ned bound the struggling hands.

In a trice they had wound strips torn from their bed clothes around the man's ankles and improvised a gag which effectually silenced him. Then they trussed him up so he could not move and, having taken from his pockets a bunch of keys and a pistol, they were ready for their long deferred escape.

"Talk about luck!" panted Ned, for the capture had not been easy in spite of the fellow's drunken condition.

"We're not out of the woods just yet," cautioned Tom.

"Well, let's get out of this dungeon for a start," proposed Ned.

Then, having shoved the trussed guard under one of the cots, they arranged the clothes on both of them to make it appear that the prisoners were sleeping after their meal, and, having gone out by the door, they locked their gagged guard within and stole swiftly down the corridor.

They had to proceed cautiously, for they were unfamiliar with the interior of the castle and did not know at what moment they might run into Cunningham or some of his men. So they paused at every turn to look about them before advancing.

Twice, as they did this, they saw forms or heard through the gloom approaching voices and footsteps, and had to hurry back and secrete themselves. But at length they made their way up a flight of stairs, the same ones down which they had been taken after the exposure of Cunningham's masked face. They were now on the ground floor of the castle, where they had first been imprisoned.

It was night, and only a few dim lights here and there in the long, deserted corridors showed them which way to go. They did not know

what turns to take. Any moment might send them stumbling upon a band of their enemies.

They conversed in whispers, went a little way down one passage, only to find that it ended against a blank wall, returned to try another with like poor results. They wanted to get out into the open, to find the House on Wheels if possible, and escape in that. But luck seemed to be against them.

They wandered about, several times having to take refuge behind piles of débris to escape groups of men. Presently they saw a light at one end of a long corridor. Stealing toward it, they found that the light came from an open room, whence proceeded the murmur of many voices. Adjoining the large room, in which several men were gathered, was a smaller apartment, a storage place, evidently.

"Come in here!" whispered Tom to his chum, and they slipped in not a second too soon, for Cunningham strode down the hall and entered the main, lighted room where a conference seemed to be going on.

Then, hidden in the small room and listening at a ventilator communicating with the other apartment, Tom and Ned heard enough talk to make clear to them the nature of the business carried on in the old castle.

As Tom had suspected, Cunningham was a

rascally but talented manufacturer of fine optical and scientific machines and instruments. He had failed in doing a legitimate business and had turned to crooked ways.

As the talk went on, Tom saw why he had been approached to make machinery and tools for turning out illegal goods. It was because Cunningham wanted to sell them at an enormous profit, not having to pay any patent royalties. Owing to Tom's refusal, and because of his inability to get other firms to make any machines, Cunningham had taken to stealing shipments of goods from large manufacturing concerns. He had allied himself with a band of train robbers who, departing from the usual holding up of pay and express cars, were looting fast freights. Sometimes the trains were held up by means of false signals and again cars on sidings were broken into and the cases stolen and brought to the castle for distribution among fences, as dealers in thieves' loot are called.

Cunningham was doing some manufacturing in the castle, it became known to Tom and Ned as they listened, and this branch would have been gone into on a larger scale had Tom consented to make the necessary machinery.

Then, unexpectedly, the two heard some startling news. Floyd Barton was Cunningham's

nephew and the young man who had danced so often with Mary Nestor was using part of his wealth in the illegal manufacture of patented goods. Whether Barton was present at the conference, Tom and Ned could not discover, for though they could hear the talk they could not see the speakers.

"Well, we've found out all we want to know, Ned," remarked Tom, as they got down off the box on which they had been standing to bring their ears nearer the ventilator.

"I should say so! Why, this Cunningham is nothing but what you said he was—a crook!"

"And those with him are just plain thieves!" said Tom. "Well, we've got enough evidence to jail the lot of them."

"Including Barton!" said Ned.

"Yes, including Barton!"

"But first we've got to get out of here," went on Ned. "Come on, before that meeting breaks up," and he nodded toward the other room.

He and Tom came out of their hiding place and, as they did so, Ned saw, lying on a ledge, an automatic pistol. With an exclamation of satisfaction, he picked it up, ascertained that the magazine was filled, and put it in his pocket. Tom had the one taken from the guard.

"We've got to work fast!" Tom whispered

to his chum, as they went back along the corridor. "Try the first window you come to and we'll light out!"

"This looks like a good one," said Ned, indicating a casement which, they could see by looking out, was not far from the ground. "Come on!"

As Ned threw one leg over the sill and Tom was in readiness to follow, they heard a noise behind them and saw Cunningham running toward them.

"Guards! Guards!" yelled the Englishman. "The prisoners are escaping! Help me!"

CHAPTER XXIII

SETTING THE TRAP

Just for an instant Ned Newton hesitated. It was a critical moment.

"Go on! Go on!" Tom Swift frantically yelled to his chum. "Don't stop now!"

"He may shoot!" objected Ned, who was in no position to assume the offensive, though both he and Tom were now armed.

"No, he won't!" Tom exclaimed. "He's only bluffing! A coward! Go on! I'm right with you!"

"Here goes then!" and Ned, ignoring the frantic shouts of Basil Cunningham, leaped from the window. It was a little higher up from the ground than he had thought and his fall rather jarred him. But he rolled over to be out of the way when Tom jumped.

The young inventor, after a glance back over his shoulder, which showed that Cunningham was without a visible weapon, leaped over the window sill and joined his chum below. Tom

managed to keep his feet in his leap. In the old castle, and as he leaned out of the window, Cunningham continued to shout:

"The prisoners! They're escaping! Where are those confounded guards?"

The whole place was aroused now and other voices could be heard mingling with those of the Englishman in excited shouts. Evidently, those who had been present at the conference of which Tom and Ned had overheard so much, were now joining, or getting ready to join, the pursuit.

Lights flashed in many windows that had hitherto been in darkness. There was the sound of running feet and the clank of metal as though the guards were arming themselves with swords instead of rifles and automatic pistols.

Ned got to his feet, to find Tom at his side. The young inventor grasped his chum's arm, holding his automatic in his other hand, and gasped:

"Come on! Run for it! It's now or never!"

"But which way shall we run?" asked Ned. "I'm all turned around!"

It was no wonder. The night was dark and the weird ruin of a castle stood out in uncanny

relief with lights in many windows. Tom and Ned had leaped from a window at the rear of the place, a view of the castle which they had never had before. So they were a bit confused.

"The main gate is around the other side!" panted Ned, as he ran on beside Tom.

"Never mind that. There must be a back way out, and I think it will be healthier for us to take that than the front way. They'll be sure to be laying for us there."

"Guess that's true!" muttered Ned.

The eyes of the escaped prisoners were now becoming accustomed to the darkness all about them, for they had come from comparatively well illuminated corridors into the pitch black night, and this is always confusing. They had a dim vision of a wall or a fence at the rear of the castle. It was probably a continuation of the fence in front, with its ornate and massive pillars, though the front gate was gone.

"If only the back gate is in the same condition we may be in luck," Tom remarked as they ran on.

They looked back for just a moment and saw several figures leap from the same window out of which they had jumped. Framed in the light, these pursuers were easily visible.

Suddenly there was a sliver of flame in the

darkness at the rear of the castle. A sharp report followed and then the whine of a bullet over the heads of the two fugitives.

"Hot stuff, Tom!" muttered Ned.

"They mean business!" assented the young inventor. "But we've got an answer ready!"

He turned quickly and fired at random, purposely aiming over the top of a dark patch that seemed to be composed of smaller patches. That it was a group of bandits summoned by Cunningham, Tom did not doubt.

There was a momentary halt on the part of the pursuers at this evidence of preparedness on the part of the late prisoners. But another bullet came whining its vicious song over the heads of the two young men. When Ned would have turned and fired, Tom called:

"Save your cartridges! We may need 'em later! Isn't that a gate just ahead?"

He pointed to where the fence seemed to have a break in it.

"It's a gate, all right," Ned answered. "But closed."

"And with a man on guard!" added Tom, as they drew closer and saw a figure emerge from some bushes to confront them. That it was a guard was evident a moment later, for he stepped across the path to bar the progress

of Tom and Ned and was bringing a rifle to the ready as he growled:

"Get back there! Nobody allowed out of this gate without the boss says so! Get back!"

"Get back yourself!" snarled Tom, and as he spoke he fired, but aiming over the guard's hat. So close was the bullet, though, that the fellow dropped his gun in mortal terror and yelled:

"I'm through!"

Away he sped in the darkness.

"The fates grant that he didn't take the keys with him!" murmured Tom, as he and Ned ran on toward the gates which they could make out more plainly now.

"It isn't likely they're locked if a man was on guard," suggested Ned, and so it proved. The rusty iron gates swung under the vigorous pushes of the two, and a moment later they found themselves out in the road, while behind them could be heard the confused shouts of their pursuers.

"Oh, for a car now!" cried Tom.

He and Ned were running down the road, not knowing and little caring in what direction, so long as they were leaving the castle and its bandits behind them. As they swung around a corner, where the road widened, Ned saw a

deeper patch of blackness and, pointing to it, gave a cry of joy.

"What is it?" demanded Tom Swift.

"The House on Wheels!" yelled Ned.

A moment later the fugitives came to where their vehicle was parked beside the road. It was in darkness and there seemed to be no life about it. Hesitating only a moment, to make sure of this, Ned and Tom approached. In their hearts they were hoping that the machine would not be in the possession of the enemy.

It did not seem to be. They were not challenged as they leaped to the driver's seat, and in a moment Tom had switched on the lights.

"We're in luck, Ned!" he yelled, as a glance at the various gages showed that there was plenty of oil and gas. "Now if they haven't put it on the blink, we'll let them have a look at our tail light in about two seconds!"

The self-starter hummed. There was a responding roar from the powerful motor, and in another instant Tom Swift was heading his machine down the mountain at ever increasing speed.

There had been several days of dry weather following the storm, and the dust of the highway reflected the headlights well so that driving was comparatively easy. The speed increased so that Ned called out:

"Aren't you hitting it up pretty fast, Tom?"

"Got to!" was the grim answer. "They're coming after us! Listen!"

He slowed for a second, silencing his engine a bit, and from behind came the roaring exhaust of another car.

"They've got to go some to get me now!" exulted Tom. "We're on a down grade, and as soon as the motor warms up I'll show them what my House on Wheels can do!"

Faster and faster they sped down the winding road in the darkness. The hand on the speedometer went to 25 to 30, and then on past 35. When it got to 45 Ned looked at Tom and took a tighter grip of the seat rail.

"Will she stand it, Tom?" he asked.

"We'll soon find out!" was the laconic reply.

On toward 50 the hand was moving, and soon it had passed that figure. Then it was 55! Still Tom Swift did not take his foot off the accelerator.

"Whew!" whistled Ned. "She's doing better than sixty miles an hour, Tom!"

"That's nothing—downhill!" was the response. But 60 seemed enough, and at that speed—terrific when the size of the machine was considered—Tom held the road wonderfully well. There was no longer the sound of pursuit.

"I guess they saw our tail light and gave up!" chuckled Tom. "We're well out of that!"

"What's the next move?" Ned asked.

"Stop at the nearest place where there are police and give the alarm!" snapped Tom. "I'm not going to let Cunningham get away with the stuff he's trying to pull."

They went on for several miles at this high speed, and then, when faint dawn was rosily tinting the east, they came down off Dismal Mountain to a level road and, inquiring of a passing truckman, learned the location of the headquarters of the nearest State Police.

"So that's the secret of Dismal Mountain, is it?" asked a rather sleepy sergeant who had been on duty all night. Tom and Ned had gasped out their story, touching only the high spots of their capture and escape. "Road agents, train robbers, and bandits hanging out in the castle, eh?" went on the officer.

"Will you look after 'em?" asked Tom, leaving the station to get into his House on Wheels again.

"I sure will, Mr. Swift. And thanks a lot for the tip. I'll spread a net for these scoundrels. Dismal Mountain is going to lose its secret and its mystery. Luckily, there aren't many roads leading down from it. I'll have every one covered. Those fellows will walk

right into my trap, and those that don't come down—well, we'll go up and get 'em!" he finished, with a grim laugh.

He hurried inside to send out a general alarm and Tom kept on toward the House on Wheels.

"Where to now?" asked Ned.

"To Chesterport," Tom answered. But there was no enthusiasm in his voice. Ned could guess why. The gossip Tom had heard about Mary Nestor and Floyd Barton was eating at his heart like a canker.

The sun was scarcely above the horizon when Tom and Ned, leaving to the State Police the work of rounding up the bandits in Cunningham's gang, rolled in the House on Wheels up in front of the Winthrop home. There was no stopping now blocks away for fear of wounding the social sensibilities of Mrs. Winthrop.

CHAPTER XXIV

JUST IN TIME

THOUGH it was very early, one of the men about the Winthrop place was already astir, preparing to wash down the front porch with a hose. Tom, followed by Ned, strode up the front walk, and the man, staring at the big House on Wheels which had stopped at the front curb, looked in surprise at the two rather unkempt and disheveled early morning callers.

"I'm Mr. Swift," Tom explained, smiling at the man.

"Oh, yes! Excuse me, sir! I didn't recognize you. I remember now! You were here at the house party given for Miss Nestor. Of course! I didn't know you—in—er——"

"These clothes!" finished Tom, with a laugh. "I don't blame you." He and Ned still wore the old garments that had been given in exchange for their own more fashionable attire. Doubtless some of the bandits retained the new suits.

"Yes, of course, Mr. Swift," murmured the man. "Will you come in? It's a little bit early, but——"

"Is Miss Nestor up yet?" asked Tom, and a moment later he realized what a foolish question it was. It was barely six o'clock, and of course none of the household would be up.

"No, sir," the man replied. "Miss Nestor isn't here now."

"She isn't? Where is she?" demanded Tom, a strange feeling around his heart.

"She and Miss Winthrop and several other guests went on a houseboat trip with Mr. Barton down the river two days ago."

"With Mr. Barton?" Tom fairly shouted.

"Yes, sir. He has a large houseboat. It was quite a party. But they are expected back to-day."

"What time?"

"About noon, I think, sir."

"Where will the houseboat dock?"

"Down the river," and the man mentioned a certain dock.

"Thanks," said Tom, as he turned away.

"Depend upon it, Tom," asseverated Ned stoutly, "Mary doesn't know Barton's character or she wouldn't even dance with him, let alone going off on houseboat parties."

"That remains to be seen," and Tom's voice

had a bitter tone in it. "That remains to be seen."

"Where are you going?" asked Ned as he climbed up to the seat beside his chum.

"Down to the dock to wait for the arrival of that houseboat. We'll park there, get something to eat, and freshen up a bit. I want to have a little conversation with Mr. Floyd Barton."

Ned could guess the interview would not be exactly pleasant for Mr. Floyd Barton, and he smiled grimly.

It was so early that the passage of the big auto through the streets of Chesterport attracted little attention this time. The dock was found without difficulty, and in a vacant space near the river Tom parked his House on Wheels. Then he and Ned got breakfast, of which they stood in considerable need.

A hasty inspection of the auto showed that though the bandits had used it roughly, no material damage was done. A thorough cleaning would put it in shape again. There was considerable mud about, showing that it had been run in the rain after Tom and Ned had fled from it.

A bath, a change to fresh clothes, bought as soon as the stores were opened, and a rest soon repaired some of the ravages of the imprison-

ment that showed on the two young men. Then they took their ease in the House on Wheels while waiting for the boat to come back with the merry party of young folks. It seemed a long while, but it was scarcely noon when a whistle was heard and Ned, looking out, announced:

"Here she comes!"

Tom roused himself, squared his shoulders, and began to walk toward the dock where some hands were making ready to moor the pleasure craft.

Ned followed. He wanted to see all that should take place.

"Wonder if the State Police will get Cunningham and his gang," mused Ned, as they stood on the dock waiting for the boat to be made fast.

"They will, sooner or later," said Tom. "Just now I'm more interested in the nephew than I am in that beefy Englishman."

The houseboat came to a squeaking stop at the end of the dock, and when the gangplank was in place several laughing, and evidently happy, young men and women began to disembark. Tom watched closely but did not see Mary and Barton. A frown came over his face as he moved quickly down the dock, followed by Ned.

Then Grace Winthrop, surrounded by a group of admirers, came off.

"It was a wonderful party!" said one girl.

"Just wonderful!" agreed Grace. "I hope you liked it, Aunt Mary," she said to an elderly relative who had gone along as a chaperone.

"Oh, yes, it was nice," was the reply. "But it was a bit damp."

"Always is on the water! Ha! Ha!" chuckled a youth clad in a very gay sweater. Then Grace caught sight of Tom and Ned.

"Oh, Mr. Swift! So glad to see you!" she cried. "Mr. Barton tried to get word to you and Mr. Newton to come on our excursion, but Mary said he couldn't reach you. She said you'd gone to Dismal Mountain. Did you go there?"

"Yes," answered Tom, shaking hands, "I did. Where is Mary now?" he asked, scarcely able to restrain his impatience.

"Oh, she and Mr. Barton must be down in the cabin yet," was the answer. "I thought she came off, but she evidently remained to——"

Tom Swift did not stop to hear the remainder of the sentence. He strode aboard the boat, made his way toward the cabin, but halted outside the door at the sight of two figures in the room. Ned could look over his chum's shoulder and see Mary with Floyd Barton standing

close to her. The approach of the recent prisoners was so silent that the two in the cabin had not heard them.

"Now, Mary, why can't you be nice to me?" Floyd was saying, as his arm went toward the girl who seemed to shrink away from him. "I gave you a nice time, didn't I?"

"Yes, Mr. Barton, it was a lovely party."

"Why don't you call me Floyd?"

"I—I scarcely know you well enough." Mary's voice was low and she seemed in distress. Her back was toward Tom and Ned.

"You'll soon get to know me better," went on Barton boldly. "I'm very fond of you, Mary. Why are you so cold and distant? Now you and I—" He almost had his arm around her now.

"Mr. Barton, stop! Stand away from me!" exclaimed Mary.

Tom Swift made a jump into the cabin and, with a hand on Barton's shoulder, swung that surprised youth about.

"You dirty dog!" cried Tom, almost beside himself with rage. "I've found you out just in time!"

He gave Barton a shove which would have floored that young man had not Ned caught and held him.

"Oh, Tom!" cried Mary, and, holding out

her hands she was soon clasped in Tom Swift's willing arms. "Oh, Tom! I'm so glad you came! He—he——"

A look of disgust came over her face as she looked at Barton.

"He won't annoy you again," said Tom grimly.

But now Barton had recovered his poise and, pulling away from Ned, demanded:

"What does this mean? How dare you come aboard my boat without an invitation? Who are you, anyhow—Oh, it's Swift and partner!" he added with a sneer, as he recognized the twain.

"Swift and partner!" chuckled Ned. "And the partner's name isn't Slow, either," he added, as, putting out a hand, he caught Barton as the latter was about to leave. Perhaps the rascal suspected something of what was in the wind.

"What does this mean? Let me go! You have no right here!" stormed Barton.

Mary soon recovered from the upset caused by Barton's advances and stood beside Tom Swift. By this time the high voices from the cabin had attracted the attention of several of the houseboat party, and they turned back to see what the trouble was.

"Let me go!" snarled Barton to Ned. "If you don't——"

He made as if to strike Ned, but the latter, drawing his automatic said calmly:

"Now take it easy! You can't get away any more than that rascally uncle of yours can."

"My uncle! Is he——"

"By this time Mr. Cunningham and his gang of bandits in the castle are under arrest," said Ned, though as a matter of fact he did not know this. "The game is up, Barton!" he added grimly. "Ask Tom Swift if it isn't."

Tom, a happy smile on his lips as he stood beside Mary, nodded in affirmation. A desperate look came over Floyd Barton's face. He glanced about wildly as if for a way of escape. Then he suddenly pulled loose from Ned, but as he was about to run from the cabin he found himself in the arms of a burly dock officer who demanded:

"What's the row about? And why have you that gun?" he asked of Ned a bit sternly.

"Because I don't want that criminal to escape!" was Ned's answer.

"Criminal! Mr. Barton a criminal?" came in a startled chorus from many of the late houseboat party.

"A criminal!" said Tom Swift calmly but firmly. "A partner with his rascally uncle, Basil Cunningham, in the illegal operations on Dismal Mountain. I am Tom Swift, and Ned

Newton and I have just escaped from that mountain of mystery. The criminals up there captured us and my House on Wheels. They held Ned and me prisoners and we overheard enough of their plots to send them all to jail. They're under arrest now," he added, giving more details and particulars of what had happened on Dismal Mountain. "And you'll be under arrest too, very shortly, Floyd Barton," concluded Tom.

"He may consider himself under arrest now," announced the dock man. "I'm a special officer and I'll take him into custody."

"You can't! You haven't a warrant!" stormed Floyd.

"I'll hold you until Mr. Swift can swear a warrant out," said the special officer, who knew and disliked Floyd Barton. "Come on now! Will you go peaceably or do you want the bracelets?" and from a pocket he took out shining handcuffs.

"All right!" said Barton, with a scowl at Tom Swift. "You win!"

CHAPTER XXV

WEDDING BELLS

Such excitement as this had never before been known among the circles in which Grace Winthrop and her friends moved.

"Mother will be furious at me for ever having had Mr. Barton in the house," said Mary to her friends.

"It wasn't your fault," they told her. "How could you know he was such a rascal?"

"I couldn't! Oh, isn't it perfectly terrible!"

"Terrible!" echoed the girls.

"Rather jolly fun, I call it!" chuckled the young man in the violently colored sweater. "It makes a bit of excitement."

If the truth be known, the girls may have felt the same way about it, only they were not honest enough to acknowledge it.

While Ned left with the special officer to see that Floyd Barton was locked up, pending formal charges that would be filed against him,

Tom and Mary went to the House on Wheels to be by themselves.

"Tell your mother I'll be along soon, Grace," was Mary's message to her relative.

"Take your time!" and Grace's voice had a mischievous ring in it.

With much buzzing talk the party left the houseboat, having enough news, with what was to follow, to keep gossip busy for months. Tom and Mary entered the little living room of the House on Wheels.

"Oh, Tom," said Mary again, "I'm so glad you came when you did! It was providential!"

"If I had been a little longer, would I have been too late?" asked Tom, with a smile, as he sat down beside the girl.

"To late for what?"

"Too late to ask you to marry me at once and have done with all this worry?"

"Why Tom! Marry you at once? Oh—Tom—I—I——"

"Well, I heard, while I was held a prisoner in the castle, that you were soon going to marry Barton. And so——"

"Going to marry *him!* Oh, never, Tom! *Never!* Of course he was very nice to me—at first—but——"

"But what?" asked Tom, as she hesitated.

"Well—I—er—I——"

When Tom and Mary came out of the House on Wheels a little later he had made certain of what he had suspected a long time, that Mary Nestor was worth to him more than all else in the world.

When Tom and Mary arrived at the Winthrop house some time afterward, they found a message from the State Police, announcing that Cunningham and his gang had fairly run into the net spread about Dismal Mountain for them, and with the exception of a few unimportant men, all were captured.

When Floyd Barton, who had been lodged in jail, heard this news, brought to him by Ned who went back to the castle to look things over, the young man caved in and made a complete confession. He was more a tool of his rascally uncle than anything else, but his money had furnished working capital for the bandits.

Floyd had been particularly struck by Mary's charm and had conducted a rushing campaign to make her capitulate to him. For a time, she afterward confessed to Tom, she had been fascinated by him. But his true character was soon apparent.

Thus the mystery of Dismal Mountain was cleared up. A search of the castle revealed not only much loot, besides the valuable instruments, but also machinery for turning out more.

It had been Cunningham's intention to set up the machinery he had hoped to have Tom Swift make for him in this same castle and go into the illegal instrument manufacturing business on a large scale. But with the rounding-up of the gang, all these plans came to an end.

It was also discovered that many of the weird and ghostlike manifestations seen on Dismal Mountain were caused by the Cunningham gang with the object of keeping people away. Only Tom Swift's whimsical decision to investigate the place brought the tricks to light.

"Well, I guess it's all settled," Tom announced to Ned one day, when they had been guests at the Winthrop home for some days after all the rascals were sent to prison.

"What's all settled?" Ned wanted to know.

"My wedding plans. Mary and I are going on our honeymoon in the House on Wheels."

"What did I tell you?" chuckled Ned. "I knew, as soon as you began to build it, that you'd use it for that."

"Only at one time," commented Tom, with a laugh, "it began to look as if nobody but Cunningham would use it."

"That's right," assented Ned.

It developed that after Tom's refusal to have anything to do with him, Cunningham had

his men shadow Tom and, when the House on Wheels was headed for Dismal Mountain plans were made to capture it and the occupants. How well these plans succeeded, Tom Swift was in a position to know.

Three weeks after the round-up of the gang there was a beautiful ceremony in the Union Church of Shopton. As the wedding bells pealed forth their joyous music, Ned Newton and Helen Morton, who had been Mary's and Tom's attendants, marched down the aisle behind the happy couple.

"Don't they sound nice?" said Ned to Helen.

"What?"

"Those wedding bells! I hope they'll soon be ringing for us, Helen!"

"Oh, behave yourself, Ned Newton," was all she said. "This is no time to talk about such things!"

As Tom marched out of the church amid a shower of rice and old shoes he saw in the crowd waiting to greet him many old and new friends. His father was there, with Mrs. Baggert, the faithful housekeeper.

"Long life and happiness to you and your sweet bride, Tom!" called the old lady.

"Thanks!" murmured the young groom.

"Dat's whut I say!" echoed Eradicate. "An'

I's gwine to lib wif Massa Tom an' Miss Mary when dey sot up housekeepin'!" declared the old Negro.

"Bless my pocketbook!" exclaimed Mr. Damon, who, of course, was among the guests. "Tom Swift getting married! My! My!"

"Well, what's wrong with that?" asked Mr. Jackson.

"Why, it means the end of his wonderful inventions!"

"Nonsense! Nothing of the sort!" declared the shop manager. "Tom Swift will never stop inventing. I shouldn't wonder, now that he's married, but what he'll do the best work of his life."

"Well," said Mr. Damon dryly, "that remains to be seen."

Then, amid the continued ringing of the wedding bells, Tom Swift and his bride went on their honeymoon trip in the House on Wheels.

THE END

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